

Terminal Justice

Chapter 1: Where In The World Is Mr. Black? by Overkill

Next Chapter

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Where In The World Is Mr. Black?

Harry was pacing in his suite at Black Island, racking his brain regarding his next move. After Henchgirl's well-intentioned reality call earlier, the wizard began to consider the possibility of taking an extended non-working vacation...especially after the inventive witch produced a newspaper article highlighting yet another miracle purportedly accomplished by his alter ego, Mr. Black.

According to the surprisingly objective article in the Daily Prophet, the non-apprehended dregs of Voldemort's legacy missed at his showdown against the dark wizard were finally no more. The special edition spouted incontrovertible proof that the surviving Death Eaters had taken refuge in one of Voldemort's secondary and previously Unplottable lairs...the old Parkinson Manor.

While the fact that the Prophet was conveying useful information was surprising in and of itself, what Harry found truly mind-boggling was that the authorities were crediting his alter ego with their destruction. The Wizarding press reported that the previously unlocatable manor house vanished in giant fireball the previous evening, taking out the house and all of the Dark Lord's remaining followers...but incredibly leaving the Muggle dwellings adjacent to the Wizarding home completely unscathed.

To help drive her point that the world did not need a fulltime guardian, the helpful Potions' Mistress provided the young wizard with a Muggle paper...the London Times...reporting that a RAF cargo carrier was flying over the Mayfair district when its rear hatch

malfunctioned, dumping several metric tons of munitions over an abandoned settlement. The paper went on to report that the house was due for demolition for many years anyway, but had been curiously overlooked by the district's public works office.

Seeing the proof of her words in fine print, Harry acquiesced to Henchgirl's wishes.

"So, what exactly is it that you want me to do for this new project of yours again?" Harry asked again, after receiving an incomprehensibly detailed accounting from the Professor.

When the short man opened his mouth to repeat himself, Henchgirl smacked her companion over the head. "In short," she answered, "it's a completely new approach to the Port-Trans system. If successful, we will have a more secure system with a greater range and capacity. It also has a new targeting system, which should help us deliver to otherwise inaccessible areas."

Harry raised an eyebrow in interest. "So what is the maximum range?" he inquired curiously.

"Just yesterday, we transported a cat from here to the Hawaii islands without a problem," the Professor answered excitedly.

Henchgirl, ever the voice of reason, added, "Of course, we also missed the beach by about ten feet, which dumped the cat into Pacific Ocean. And we also turned it green."

"And all its hair fell out," the Professor supplemented helpfully.

Harry looked a little worried at that.

"But we fixed the green problem," the Professor promised, "and we're much better on our accuracy now. There's absolutely nothing to worry about!"

Harry nodded. "And the hair problem?"

Henchgirl smiled and held up a small vial. "Hair restorer."

The little man's nervous grin somehow failed to inspire much confidence, but Harry was a Gryffindor and Gryffindors went forward.

"All right," the world famous wizard answered, "what do I need to do?"

"Just stand at the center of the locating pad..." the Professor advised while gesturing to the concentric red and white circles on the floor.

"You mean this giant bull's eye?" the dark-haired wizard asked.

"Precisely!" the older man bubbled as he began energetically turning knobs and mashing buttons. After checking a multitude of gauges, none of which Harry could derive the purpose of, the mad scientist look-alike moved his hand over a large red button and yelled, "Contact!"

"No! No! No!" Henchgirl protested. "I've told you this already! You're supposed to give a count down before pressing the button!"

"Fine, whatever!" the Professor waved away the young woman's concern. "One hundred... ninety nine... ninety eight..."

"Forget it," she muttered resignedly. "Fire in the hole!" she yelled, just before smacking the Professor's hand, activating the machine and causing the widely feared 'Mr. Black' to disappear in a glow of magic.

"Success!" the Professor yelled happily, before capering around the lab like a two-year-old. "We didn't even leave any body parts behind on this run!"

"Let's see how well it did," Henchgirl said hesitantly. Activating the teleporter's viewfinder, she zoomed to the area where their employer should have landed. Not seeing the wizard anywhere, the young witch began rapidly panning the shoreline. Unfortunately, this frantic activity was too much for the device, which began overheating and merrily melting its components.

Stifling a growl, she pulled out her Black Ink Zippo. "Mr. Black? The teleporter's just got fried. You'll have to Apparate back to the island." After several moments of silence, she inquired, "Mr. Black?"

As the minutes drug by with no word from the infamous Mr. Black, the two inventors looked at each other in slowly dawning terror.

Using her keen sense of scientific deduction, Henghgirl effortlessly summarized the situation.

"Uh oh."

Harry picked himself up off the cold concrete floor and looked around. Taking in his surroundings...which consisted of a great many safety deposit boxes, several of which emanated a veritable glow of magic...the transplanted wizard concluded that he was in a dimly lit inside of a vault.

Running a hand across his bald and shiny head, Harry sighed and downed the vial. "Why does all the strange stuff always happen to me?" he pleaded rhetorically. Shaking his head at life in general, Harry pulled out his Zippo. "Professor, are you there?"

Nothing.

"Henghgirl...?" he asked nervously.

Still no answer.

"Bloody hell!" Harry swore. He knew he should stay in the vicinity of... wherever it is that he landed, but he was not going to stay locked inside of a vault. Throwing his hand out, he sent one of those cool Russian demolition spells flying into the vault's door. With a protest of tearing metal, daylight streamed into the room Harry was occupying as the tattered steel door pivoted outwards and landed noisily on the floor. Oddly enough, the door seemed to cry out in pain as it landed.

'Odd,' Harry thought as he casually strode out of the room. Much to his surprise, he immediately encountered four individuals, all of whom were sending incredulous glances from Harry to the vault door upon which he stood. The first person was an elderly man, dressed in what Harry thought was a World War II-era pilot's uniform. The other three were in even stranger garb; the transplanted wizard saw two women in revealing costumes standing alongside of another man in a red, full-body spandex suit. Apparently they were dressed for a party somewhere, as one of the women even had a set of feathered wings!

"Uhm... sorry about that," Harry said sheepishly. "I sometimes forget my own strength." Meeting the inquiring eyes of his four-person audience, Harry turned to the old soldier and saluted. "Some of your mates did me and mine a good turn over Mayfair once. If there's ever anything I can do for you, just let me know."

The older man looked confused and opened his mouth to say something, but Harry saved him the trouble of answering. "The RAF cargo carrier that did some demolitions work? You boys saved a lot of lives that night, and I appreciate it." Harry just nodded as the man's eyes widened in recognition. "Right, that. So, if you ever need a favor, just give me a call or something."

"Who are you?" Chuck, formerly of the elite Black Hawk squadron, asked hesitantly.

"Oh, right. Sorry about that," Harry said as he smacked himself upside the head. "I'm Mr. Black. Anyway, it's been nice meeting all of you, and I hope you get to your costume party alright. Good day!"

Harry gave a cheerful wave and meandered out of large warehouse to explore this new environment.

"Who. Was. That?" Shayera Hol, also known as Hawkgirl of the Justice League, demanded. She had wanted to question the strange man's sudden appearance...inside of a locked vault of all places...but held off when it seemed that her old friend Chuck knew him.

"Impossible..." the old pilot muttered.

"What's impossible?" Beatriz DaCosta asked in her Brazilian accent.

"My unit was only in Britain for one week during the war," the older man explained, "and we only went on one mission...a Black Ops mission. And by Black Ops, I mean that nobody knew, except the highest levels of the Brass."

"And one other person," he added mysteriously. "I suppose it won't hurt to tell you now, but we were ordered to rendezvous with one of the Brit's supposed secret agents. The guy was strange personified; he went to great lengths to keep his identity hidden, including dressing in a full-length black body suit, and told us to just call him

'Agent Black'. Anyway, we snuck aboard one of the Royal Air Force's largest cargo planes, which was fully loaded with munitions for the front lines. After we got airborne, this guy guided us to a little suburb on the outskirts of London, which had this one house he identified as a Nazi spy cell. Long story short, me and the boys went down below and blew the place to kingdom come. When we got back up from the rear bay, all we found was the front hatch wide open. The Brit was gone, but none of the parachutes were missing. We returned to base and that's the last we heard of the matter... until just now."

"Whoa... whoa... whoa!" Flash protested. "Are you saying that the kid who just wandered outside is over fifty years old?"

"Actually, the mission was over sixty years ago, so he has to be at least eighty," Chuck corrected. "But if this isn't the same guy, then how did he know? The mission was never logged."

"That's impossible!" the fastest man alive repeated. "He can't be more than eighteen! Twenty tops!"

Shayera looked completive. "Well, remember what happened to Superman with Vandal Savage? He was sent centuries into the future and met Savage, who looked the same as always. Maybe this 'Mr. Black' can go back in time."

"Unless he's immortal like Vandal Savage," the Brazilian Fire added. "Maybe he didn't need to go back in time; he could have just lived through it."

"What I want to know is why he showed up now," the former squadron commander interrupted. "How did he even know that we were here? This is a fairly secluded facility, after all."

"Well, you said he's a spy," Hawk girl mentioned, "so the 'how' is easy. As for 'why'..."

Fire quietly proposed, "Maybe he thought those idiots were a threat to your life and decided to intervene?"

"I don't know, but this is incredible!" Chuck exclaimed. "I mean, I knew that the guy had unusual training, but this is just... surreal."

Flash didn't look totally convinced, but he was leaning that way. "Well, whoever the guy is, shouldn't we take him to the League? I mean, he did flatten Luthor, the Key, and Dr. Polaris."

"You can try," Chuck advised, "but I wouldn't force him. There's no telling what tricks he's picked up over the years, and I'd hate to be you if you annoy him too badly."

The JLA members readily agreed and hurriedly went after the man to 'request' that the strange immortal English spy accompany them back to the League's watchtower. Once Harry found out that they wanted to take him to an actual space station, he was more than happy to go with them. After all, once the Professor fixed the problem with the teleporter and portable Floo, they could find Harry easily enough.

After arranging for one of their jets... 'a Javelin,' Harry thought... to drop the old man off at his home, the trio of leaguers took turns explaining about the Justice League to the bemused Harry, who spent most of the journey either staring out of the window or examining the weird Muggle gadgets the space plane contained. Once they actually docked with the station, Flash and Fire spent the next several minutes taking Harry on a tour of the orbiting space station while Shayera slipped away to notify the rest of League founders.

"...And that's pretty much it," Flash concluded.

Harry was very impressed, and wished that his friends could have come with him to see such an amazing facility. "I'm impressed. I mean, I heard that America was launching space stations and stuff, but I didn't know that it was this advanced!"

"Well, saving the world a few dozen times has to come with some perks, after all," the scarlet speedster mentioned.

"Now, it's not quite like that," a male voice responded from over Harry's shoulder. Turning around, the wizard found himself staring at a tall, broad-shouldered man. The figure was dressed in a skintight blue body stocking with a large 'S' on his chest and a flowing red cape falling across his shoulders.

"Hello," the man said cordially, extending his hand, "I'm Superman. Welcome aboard the Watchtower."

Harry dipped his head. "I'm Mr. Black. Thanks for the invite, by the way."

"You're most welcome," the costumed superhero replied. "Shayera...that's Hawkgirl -" he added at the other's confused look "- has already spoke about your arrival. If you'd follow me, some of us had a few more questions for you."

"Of course," Harry conceded. "Lead the way."

"Bye, Flash," Fire called out as the 'fastest man alive' fell in beside Harry as they followed Superman to the founder's conference room.

After escorting Harry to the League's inner sanctum, the two leaguers took their seats, leaving Harry standing in front of a circular table with seven seats. Besides Shayera, Flash, and Superman, there were three other people whom Harry did not know. The first wore a mask from his nose upwards and was clad in gray and black, with a bat emblazoned on his chest. To his left was a stern faced, dark-skinned man in a green and black spandex suit, with a logo of some sort of lantern displayed across his sternum. On the bat-obsessed man's other side was another woman, this one in a red, white, and blue swimsuit, replete with a golden lasso attached at her waist.

Harry waved at the winged woman perched on her own seat, earning one from the redhead in return.

The man who introduced himself as Superman broke the ice. "Well, Mr... Black, we have a few questions that we'd like to ask you."

"One second, please," the wizard responded.

Since Harry had discretely inquired earlier if the league had any knowledge of the magical populace, he found that there was at least three 'mystics' enrolled as members. Knowing that he would not be violating the statute of secrecy, Harry had no qualms with conjuring himself a comfortable recliner, not unlike those that Albus Dumbledore had so blatantly created a year or so prior.

Falling casually back into the stuffed chair, Harry kicked his heels up and said, "Okay, shoot."

Harry could tell that his casual conjuring of the chair had combined with his distinct lack of fear to offset the others nicely. To their credit, however, they quickly shook the shock off and continued.

"Well, the first one is-" Superman started only to be interrupted by the 'bat man'.

"What is your full name?" Batman demanded coldly. "Who sent you?"

"I believe that you just interrupted your friend," Harry said levelly. "That wasn't very polite. If there's one thing I've learned in my life, it's that good manners are very important. They can prevent all kinds of misunderstandings, you see."

"Your name," he stressed grimly.

"What's yours?" Harry returned quickly, still not losing his composure.

"I'm not the one being interrogated!" he barked.

That did put a slight chill into Harry's reply.

"And you're implying that I am?" the wizard demanded coldly.

"No, of course not! Don't mind Batman; he's suspicious around everyone." Superman jumped back in to the conversation, shooting his partner a warning glance at the same time. "We just wanted to know how you came to be on Blackhawk Island."

"Blackhawk Island?" Harry repeated curiously. "Is that where I bumped into Shayera and Flash?" At the man's nod, Harry just shrugged. "An old friend needed my help, so I went to help. Everything didn't go exactly as expected...I certainly didn't expect to run into all of you -, but it seemed to work out all right in the end."

"Yes, it did," Superman answered, thinking of the recaptured villains, as well as the reclaimed Lance of Longinus...solely due to this 'Mr. Black's' efforts.

Shayera voiced the next question, seeing as how she was interested in covert missions. Of course, the mystery of Mr. Black's age picked at her brain as well. "You mentioned a plane dropping ordinance in southern Britain earlier, remember?"

Harry just nodded at the woman in confirmation.

"Well," she hesitated, "Chuck told us that pilots on those kinds of missions are usually Black Ops. Can you tell us anything else about that mission?"

The wizard blinked once before replying, "I'd imagine that any soldiers in that line of work are bound by secrecy oaths. I don't know about how things are run here, but it's my experience that those oaths would prevent any discussion of the mission or its parameters. I can't really tell you anything more specific than that. Does that help you any?" Harry asked curiously.

Shayera thought on what he had told her for a few moments. "Yes, I think so. Thanks," she smiled.

Harry gave a half-hearted salute with two fingers. "Anytime."

"I have a question," the other woman spoke up. At Harry's interested look, she continued, "My name is Diana, by the way. What are you planning to do now that you... helped your friend?"

"I'm just a guy on vacation," Harry said before thinking for a few moments. "I had been on vacation, but I had to cut it short due to an... incident," Harry summarized carefully. "Now that it is... resolved, I suppose that I'll go back on break. I had only just got started in the States, so I guess I'll just see what there is to see."

"So you don't have any outside agenda?" Superman asked, with a significant glance at the stoic Batman.

"Well, I confess to being a little addicted to the 'Wild West'. I really liked this little Colorado town back a hundred years or so ago," Harry confided.

Harry frowned for a moment in thought. "No," he said finally, "I guess it was set more like a hundred and fifty years ago, now that I think about it."

Snorting amusedly, Harry glanced back at Diana and asked, "Do you ever have problems keeping track of things like that? I don't know about you, but I can never keep my dates straight; I'd make a right sorry History professor, I suppose."

Shrugging good-naturedly, Harry missed Diana's brief widening eyes as he returned to his previous topic. "Anyway, I picked up this great little forty five long when I was wandering through. You know, the old Single Action Army 'six shooter'?"

Harry's eyes suddenly lit up. "You know what... I think that I still have my hat! Just a minute." The wizard began digging through his coat's inner pockets in search of his treasure, completely unaware of the incredulous gazes being exchanged between the senior Leaguers.

"Aha!" Harry exclaimed when his shoulder was buried in his coat. Withdrawing the entire length of his arm, Harry removed his worn Stetson with its black leather and turned down brim. "Still in good shape, too, all things considered," the wizard said happily as he perched it on his head.

Ever the military buff, John Stewart aka the Green Lantern jumped on the opportunity to pick this... unique individual's brain. "You said you had an authentic Army-issue single action?"

Harry nodded. "Still do, actually," he answered. "By the way, if you say that your name is 'Green man', I'm out of here," Harry added resolutely.

"It's the 'Green Lantern'," the darker man answered flatly while a few of his associates hastily hid their smiles. "Can I see it?"

"Sure," the wizard said easily before shoving his whole head inside the same inner pocket that his hat had come from earlier. The group of superheroes heard irritated mutterings before Harry removed his head from the charmed pocket. Standing up, the wizard took his specially made coat off and gestured to get Superman's attention.

"Hey, you look pretty stout. Can you give a bloke a hand?" Harry asked the taller man. At the costumed figure's confused expression, Harry clarified, "Just hold my coat open." Rearranging the coat so its flaps were held wide open, he explained, "The gun belt got caught around my sword and the whole tangled bunch slid under my motorbike. Won't take but a second."

Before the dumbfounded hero could muster a rejoinder, Harry had jumped into the coat headfirst, his feet disappearing inside the pocket's hem. Even the Batman seemed shaken...however slightly...by this unforeseen development, and the superheroes spent the next several moments staring at each other with wide eyes.

The disguised Clark Kent, being the brave sort, chanced a glance into this magical space before his eyes practically jumped from his head and he resolutely looked at the ceiling. Pocket dimensions were perfectly reasonable. Inter-dimensional travel...no problem. Identical genetic cloning, evil twins, alien invasions...easy as pie. But there was just something wrong about having a garage's worth of junk in your coat pocket!

A few minutes later, Harry crawled out of his coat with the gun belt around his waist. "Thanks, mate," Harry said as he took his coat back and slipped it on. Noticing that the man didn't take his eyes off the ceiling. Harry craned his own neck upwards in order to spot what had captured the man's attention. Finding nothing, he shrugged to himself again and drew the pistol. Pulling the appropriate lever, Harry spun the small cartridge around to ensure that it was unloaded. Ensuring that the weapon was safe, he spun the weapon around in his hand so that he held it by the barrel and extending the weapon to the captivated Green Lantern.

"I don't believe it!" the normally serious ex-Marine practically gushed. "This thing is one of the original handcrafted pieces! There can be more than a handful of these still in circulation!"

"It was used when I bought it," Harry mentioned offhandedly. "I ran into an old prospector...nice bloke...who knew a thing or three about six-shooters. He's the one who fixed it up for me."

"Incredible!" Lantern breathed as he gently passed the pistol back to its owner.

Holstering the sidearm, Harry smiled at the man's delight. "Well, I've enjoyed our little chat, but breakfast was a long time ago, and I'm getting hungry. Unless you have any more pressing questions, would one of you mind pointing me in the direction of the dining hall?"

"Uhm... sure," Superman mumbled, finally snapping out of his haze. "Out the door, to the right, third door on your left."

Harry tipped his hat at the group. "Cheers." Seeing the complex door mechanism, Harry silently cast Henchgirl's spell and, before any of the leaguers could do anything, strode right through the door, ignoring the small quibble that it was shut.

The wizard's rather unorthodox departure had...yet again...reduced the six remaining adults to a catatonic state. Regaining his senses the fastest, Batman turned to his Kryptonian ally and hissed, "Do you think it wise to allow a security risk of that magnitude to wander around our most sensitive base at will?"

The barely hidden barb was sufficient to rouse the remainder of the chief council, and earned a reprisal from the man of steel. "Do you think that we have any real chance of stopping him? The man has a full scale motorcycle in his coat pocket, for goodness sake!"

"A few cheap tricks and you're prepared to just roll over?" the dark knight demanded incredulously.

"Those 'cheap tricks' are more advanced than what our mystics can pull off, and you know it!" John Stewart replied forcefully. "It would have taken both Dr. Fate and Zatanna to match that little show, and this 'Mr. Black' did it without their wands and incantations. That was some pretty high caliber stuff he was throwing around there."

"Yeah, the floor show was kinda cool, but why did he do it?" Flash asked confusedly. "I mean, all he did was let us know how dangerous he can be; wouldn't it have been smarter to play dumb? You know, hide his powers?"

Batman rotated his head slightly to center Flash in his gaze. "He was sending a message," Batman intoned, as if the matter were obvious.

"Huh?" Flash intelligently responded.

Diana nodded to herself. "He assured us that he had no hostile intentions, but he would defend himself if we attacked him first. That magic show he put on was just to highlight his warning."

"Think about it," Shayera concurred. "Without being obvious or offensive, he showed Clark up close just how advanced his power was, as well as underlining that he only came here to help a friend. Then he told Batman that he would behave himself unless we pressed him. Diana was informed that he knew she was immortal, and that he was long-lived as well. Black then proved that he was that British spy from World War II when he discretely pointed out that he knew about John's fascination with the old west. I mean, it's not like that sort of thing is public knowledge. He'd almost have to have had espionage training."

"And then he finished it up by proving that we can't imprison him even if we wanted to," Clark concluded. His brow furrowed in thought for a few moments as he pondered the mysterious stranger that had wandered into their midst. He absently flicked an irritating lock of hair out of his eyes as his mind came to the only logical conclusion.

"We should offer him a place with us," the world's strongest man concluded audibly for his teammates.

"Absolutely not!" Batman immediately countered. "He's a security risk and we should get rid of him immediately, not invite him to stay around."

"The problem is that he can probably find out anything from us whether he's a League member or not," John rejoined. "For all we know, he might have all our personal information already. If he knew about my hobby, who's to say that Black doesn't know about your private life? If he was on the team, that might encourage him from disseminating whatever intel he's gathered."

"Yeah, what GL said," Flash added. "Besides, if we told him to leave and tried to kick him out, he'd probably just turn invisible or something. Then, we'd have a very unhappy camper on our hands, and no real way to stop him."

Shayera shook her head. "I can't believe that I'm saying this, but I think that Wally has a point."

"As do I," Diana weighed in with her own opinion. "He seems to be an honorable... being. We should not scorn him merely for being different from us."

"Let's take it to a majority vote," Superman called. "All in favor of inviting Mr. Black to join us?" Of the six, only Batman's hand remained motionless. "Alright, the motion passes," Clark concluded.

Batman rose swiftly to his feet. As he swept from the room, his gravelly voice carried a warning back to his teammates. "I hope that you all know what you are doing... for your sakes."

As the automatic door closed behind Gotham's champion, Clark met the others eyes.

"Now that that's settled..." Clark inquired, "Who's going to tell our guest?"

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Chapter 2: He's Playing With Us by Overkill

Next Chapter

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He's Playing With Us

After leaving the impromptu conference, Harry followed Superman's directions to the letter. Taking a left, the wizard walked carefully down the hall until he found the third door on his left. When he went to open the door, however, Harry discovered that it was locked. Thinking it odd that the cafeteria was not open at this time of day but chalking it up to a mistake, Harry wandlessly unlocked the door and entered.

He later decided that this 'Justice League' really needed to label their rooms when he found himself in an occupied locker room.

An occupied all-female locker room.

On the up side, the partially clothed women were able to guide Harry towards the actual cafeteria—after repeatedly launching various projectiles at his face and other sensitive areas of the male anatomy. Harry made a mental note to buy the Professor something extra nice for his birthday; that mithril pair of long johns was a really good idea.

Finally reaching his objective, however, the undaunted Harry acquired his first meal in space. While he could not recommend the unidentifiable foodstuffs regarding taste, and he did find all the blatant stares he drew from the other costumed diners to be oddly reminiscent of the wizarding world, Harry was more than satisfied by the environ itself. Yet another fascinating aspect of this chiefly American breakfast meal was the introduction of his new favorite beverage—coffee. From some of the things he had heard over the years, the young wizard did not expect to like it all that much. He could safely say, however, that the sharp-tasting drink grows on a

person after a dozen or so mugs' worth. Harry was also very impressed that they already had a larger glass mug prepared and waiting for him with a convenient plastic handle. The attached spout really made consumption less messy as well. The thoughtful individual—whomever it may have been—even had the foresight to set it upon an electric base to keep the contents warm for him. The internationally famous wizard couldn't be sure, but he thought that the crowd's staring grew even denser as he took the mug to a vacant corner table.

In fact, it was while Harry was enjoying this most pleasant of American luxuries that one of the more... enthusiastic... young women who had corrected his earlier error sought him out with a proposition. Kara, who Harry noticed was dressed similarly to Superman's own costume, was kind enough to invite Harry to join her for a training session she had scheduled. Seeing as how he was mostly done anyway, Harry downed the rest of his coffee mug before disposing of his brunch's remains. Grabbing another large quantity of the brown liquid 'for the road', Harry accompanied the shorter blonde-haired woman to one of the league's sparring dojos.

"I was thinking about starting with some hand-to-hand," Kara informed him once she had locked the door behind them. "That alright with you, Tex?" she asked with a barely hidden smile.

Realizing that she must really enjoy sparring, Harry glanced around to see that the dull gray padded area was vacant; even the observatories above the 'arena' were unoccupied. "Excellent," Harry approved. "I'll just follow your lead, then."

"You do that," she muttered before rushing toward him, one arm cocked. Harry pivoted away on one foot and allowed the girl to charge past him, his arms still held at his sides. "Quick on your feet, aren't you?" she half-asked herself. "Good. This might be more fun than I thought."

Not wanting to ruin the experience for the girl, he started the same maneuver a second time when she engaged, but with a slight difference. Instead of completely pivoting away, Harry grabbed Kara's outstretched arm and tugged, pulling the red and blue heroine over his shoulder to land face-first behind him.

"Are you okay?" Harry asked anxiously.

Harry heard her grunt at the full-face impact. "I'm fine," she reassured him, "but you're looking iffy." The girl tried launching a flurry of blows at his head and torso, each of which gained in intensity, but Harry carefully blocked each one of them to avoid injuring her like their last encounter.

"Why are you just blocking me?" she demanded. "Fight back!"

"I didn't want to chance injuring you further," Harry answered honestly.

"I'm not as frail as you might think!" she blurted. Much to Harry's amazement, she took flight and charged right into him with both fists preceding her. Harry managed to catch her clenched fists in his larger hands, but the force of their collision still drove Harry back several steps.

The taller male smiled at her over their grasped hands. "Whoa!" Harry said admiringly, "You do pack a punch, don't you?"

Harry saw her grin faltering and knew that she was not enjoying his mostly defensive approach. The wizard decided that perhaps launching an offensive of his own would cheer her back up, seeing as how she wanted an actual training session. Forgetting about the added strength that Henchgirl's Re'em blood potion had given him, Harry spun the girl around by her arms and released her tiny frame mid-swing, unintentionally launching his passenger at one of the walls. Her speedy velocity had initially alarmed Harry, but as she slid to the floor after impact, he could see her silhouette still embedded in the gray safety foam.

Marveling at the ingenuity the room's designer had, Harry smiled again at the girl's antics; once she climbed shakily back to her feet, she weaved erratically back towards him. "You... Just... Try... that... again..." she demanded breathlessly.

Shrugging, Harry obliged her request, resulting in a second Kara outline on the wall. Unlike the first mostly vertical shape, which—oddly enough—hadn't yet filled back in, the second impact was more horizontal.

When the girl made her way back to him again, she muttered, "You'll have to do better than that!"

Harry admired the girl's determination, and if this was what she normally did for a practice session, he saw no reason not to help. "As you wish," the wizard obliged. Adding a repulsor charm to his fist, he reared back and caught the girl in her abdomen. He saw her eyes widen in joy as she sailed across the length of the room and made an odd gurgling noise as she contacted the safety foam. After she remained slumped on the floor for several moments, Harry crossed the distance to check on her only to the young woman sound asleep.

Regretting that his performance wasn't more rewarding for her as she was now slumbering, Harry conjured a bed and laid the costumed hero in it. Not wanting to wake her, Harry quietly left the room and continued his exploration of the space station.

"Mr. Black?" a female voice called out from behind Harry. The wizard had just familiarized himself with the League's hanger and was making his way back towards the center of the station—and consequently, more coffee. As such, he was merrily skipping down the otherwise unoccupied corridor when someone called for him, interrupting his grand production of 'I've Got a Lovely Bunch of Coconuts' and causing him to stumble. Righting himself before he plowed headlong into the ground, Harry spun around to see Diana, the Wonder Woman.

"Yes, Diana?" the wizard asked.

"Are you alright?" she asked. It was difficult for her to keep in mind that the awe-inspiring immortal from their earlier conference was the same man that now greatly resembled Flash on a sugar high.

Harry nodded his head rapidly. "Yep. Perfectly fine. Perfect. Fine. More than fine, really. You don't have coffee, do you? Great stuff, that coffee. I love coffee, don't you?" The inquisitive salvo was fired off so fast that the Amazon had no hope of answering any of them.

"Err... yes, I like coffee," Diana finally offered.

"Me, too!" Harry said brightly. "You can't have too much coffee! It's my new favorite drink, coffee is!"

The metaphorical penny finally dropped and Diana realized what had happened. "How much did you have?" she asked worriedly.

"Let's see," Harry mused while stroking his chin with one hand. "That's one... two... carry the three... add those two... fourteen!" Harry exclaimed.

"Oh, Hera!" Diana nearly moaned. She remembered the first few months of her stay in Patriarch's world, and her encounter with the devious iced mocha. But even then, she had only five. The hyperactive male in front of her had nearly three times as much!

"Hera'?" Harry asked curiously. "Does he, she, or it have coffee?"

Diana blinked. "Uhm... Hera is a goddess," she hesitantly supplied.

"And do goddesses drink coffee?" Harry demanded.

"I'm afraid not," Diana replied gently.

Harry looked disheartened for a moment. "Then what do they drink?"

Wondering exactly where this conversation was going, she informed him that all the gods drank Ambrosia.

"So much for the gods then," Harry concluded. "Let's go with plan B."

"What's plan B?" the woman asked before thinking better of it.

In reply, Harry stepped forward and grabbed the Amazon by one armored bracelet and Apparated the pair of them to the cafeteria. While Diana was settling herself from the unexpected and mildly unpleasant means of magical travel, Harry had already strode over to the buffet table. Unfortunately for the java junkie, however, breakfast had long since been put away, which included disposing of the morning's remaining coffee.

"Hey, where's the coffee?" Harry asked. "I left it right here."

"The coffee is gone," Diana said with no little relief. "There won't be anymore until tomorrow." Granted, there was always a supply in the monitor womb, but Diana felt that this small omission was warranted, given the circumstances.

"Outrageous!" Harry protested. "Accio coffee!"

Diana wasn't sure what the strange man expected to happen, but she didn't see anything out of the ordinary. Her inspection was cut off prematurely as she spotted Shayera and Kara enter the room with the former hovering cautiously over the latter. Seeing Kara looking disheveled, Diana went over to investigate, foolishly forgetting about the very caffeinated wizard she was escorting.

"What in Hera's name happened to you?" Diana asked the younger girl.

"Some weirdo guy threw my butt into the wall three times in a row hard enough to dent the titanium!" Kara groused.

Wonder Woman looked confused. "Who are you talking about?" she questioned.

Hawkgirl shrugged. "Don't look at me," she said. "I found her this way not thirty seconds ago."

"I don't know who he is," Supergirl admitted. "I thought that it was just Plasticman trying to catch a show earlier. This guy was dressed like a cowboy and walked right into our locker room when a bunch of us were changing. Said something about our stripping in the cafeteria being inappropriate. I tracked the lecher down a few minutes later and invited him to the sparring room. I figured I'd toss him around a few times in repayment. Too bad that it wasn't that morphing moron; when I got on to him for just dodging me, he knocked me clear across the room with one blow."

"So that's what happened?" Shayera asked.

"Hardly," she grumbled. "Then I tried flying straight at him; he grabbed my fists and tossed me back again. I sorta taunted him then; said he'd have to try harder than that. I thought he'd leave a gap open that I could take advantage of, but he popped me another one and knocked me out! And to top it off, I came to on a four-poster

bed—in the training room!" Kara shook her head in disbelief. "I don't know who the dude is, but I'd like to see him arm wrestle my cousin sometime."

Diana suddenly got an uncomfortable feeling that she already knew the answer. "Kara, did this man happen to be wearing a black coat and hat, had black hair and a pistol, and speak with a British accent?"

"Uhm... yeah! Why? You know him?" she asked intently.

"Well..." Diana paused as she shifted her stance, revealing the man they knew only as Mr. Black—who, at this very moment, was rapidly tapping his foot whilst observing his watch as if he were waiting for something.

"It's him!" Kara growled lowly before stalking towards the man who had quickly, efficiently, and methodically humiliated her with no obvious effort. Unfortunately for the super heroine, she picked the worst possible moment to make her advance. For while she was speeding towards Mr. Black, so was a pot full of steaming hot coffee—minus the pot.

Needless to say, the resulting yell of surprise was very audible.

"Oh, you're awake!" Harry exclaimed needlessly, "and you found my coffee! Excellent!" The wizard threw out his hand, summoning all of the precious brown liquid from its current place adorning the girl's upper torso into a conveniently conjured coffee pot.

Kara, doing a very good impression of a wet cat, just stared at Harry without comprehension until the warm sensation caught her attention. Muttering something about boiling people in oil, the girl began rapidly wiping off her shirt. "You know, that stuff is pretty hot to just be splashing people!"

"Oh... sorry 'bout that," Harry broke off from his inspection. Trying to help the girl out, Harry cast a cooling charm at the affected area. While the young woman was relieved that she was no longer in risk of burning alive, she soon noticed that her body was now experiencing a quite different reaction. Crossing her hands over her

chest, the girl shouted, "I give up! You win! I surrender! Please, for the love of Rao, just stop!"

Harry glanced at the two dumbfounded older women with a raised eyebrow, looking for an explanation for the younger member of their gender. Finding no help from that quarter, Harry just resigned himself to never understanding the fairer sex. Noticing that the girl's shirt had a large stain on the front and that she had her arms wrapped around her as if she was chilled, Harry sent a cleaning charm at her shirt, immediately followed by a warming charm.

Seeing that the girl seemed back to rights, Harry shrugged to himself and noisily downed a good portion of the coffee he was still holding. "Hey, Shayera!" Harry called out once he came back up for air.

"Uh... hello?" she asked uneasily.

"You want some coffee?" Harry asked while holding the pot outstretched in one hand. "It's really good!" he encouraged.

At her shake of the head, he looked at the blonde girl. "Would you like some... Kara, wasn't it?" Harry petitioned.

"Yes..." the addressed teenager replied distractedly. Gesturing from her front to the glass container that she swore he didn't have a moment ago, she asked, "How did you do that?"

"Magic, of course!" he beamed. Holding the container out to Diana, he silently offered its contents to the immortal warrior.

"I'll pass," she said diplomatically. "Are you sure that—" She stopped her half-hearted attempt at intervention when he upended the vessel and drained its caffeinated contents.

"Ahh..." he sighed with his eyes closed. "That's much better!" Vanishing the pot, he looked at the three women eagerly. "So... what does one do for fun on a space station?"

"Well..." Shayera hedged, "we had something to ask you first. Diana?"

"Hmm... oh, right. We were—that is, the League's executive council—was wondering if you would consider joining us," Diana offered uneasily.

Kara groaned. "Please tell me you aren't serious..." she grumbled.

"Do League members get coffee?" Harry asked intently.

"Yeah," Shayera answered the odd request, "as much as you want. What?" she demanded at the exasperated look her teammate Diana was sending her.

"Deal!" Harry announced. "I expect that some friends of mine will come looking for me eventually, but until then I'm golden."

"You do know that we have to put down alien invasions, don't you?" Kara demanded. "Hostile bids for world domination, freaky monsters, crackpot warlords, anal retentive governments... that kind of thing, right?"

Harry just smiled in reply. "Sounds like home. Count me in."

Diana blinked at how easy he accepted threats that gave even Kal some occasional hesitation. "Okay. I'll let the others know you're up for it then," she accepted.

"Cool!" the wizard agreed. "Now, can you recommend any sights to see, stuff to do, that sort of thing?"

"What is it you're interested in?" Shayera questioned.

"Well, I sort of rushed through Vegas not too long ago on business. It seemed really neat, but about all I got to do was try the slots a couple of times," Harry replied. "I always wanted to give that place another shot."

"Well, Zatanna—she's that sorceress we told you about—has a magic show that she does in Vegas," the Thanagarian woman advised. "That's a pretty good place to start, and then you've got all those card tables..." Harry could see that the woman really liked the area just from the way she was talking.

"So, you three want to come with?" Harry asked.

"Awesome!" Kara shouted. "Count me in!"

"I don't know..." Diana hesitated. "Kal wouldn't really appreciate you going there unsupervised," she informed the girl.

Kara pouted. "Oh, come on. Besides, if you come along, then I won't be unsupervised."

"I suppose that it would be good to see how Zatanna's doing," Diana wavered.

"That's the spirit!" Harry praised, claspings the Amazon on the shoulder. "How about you, Shayera?"

"I'd like to," she said glumly, "but I can't."

Harry frowned. "Why not?"

In answer, she flexed her wingspan. "See the problem?" she said. "I can't exactly blend into a crowd."

"Is that all?" Harry asked disbelievingly. He flicked his finger in the direction of her wings. "I don't see any problems at all," he said smugly.

"What do you mean you don't see—What did you do?" she cried out when she looked over her shoulder.

"You said that you can't go out because people notice your wings," Harry answered casually, "so I made them invisible. Now you can go with us," he finished cheerfully.

"Incredible..." the winged woman breathed, apparently stroking thin air. "How did you do this?" she demanded.

"Magic..." was his one-word answer. "So, can we go now?"

"We still have to change clothes," Kara answered, "something you might want to consider." At his curious glance, she explained, "I think that the 'Tex Avery' motif might stand out a bit, even in Vegas."

"Oh..." Harry replied after comprehension dawned. "No worries!" He quickly pulled off his hat and gun belt before stowing both articles back inside the sub-dimensional pocket that the Professor had made for him within his coat. "How's that?"

The blonde teenager thought for a moment over his... unique wardrobe. "Well, the jacket's okay, but you might want to consider something a little less formal. A t-shirt and jeans always works."

Harry conceded the point and rapidly transfigured the wizarding casual wear into the recommended articles. He had seen several male muggles wearing the shirt-and-jeans ensemble with a large white skull splattered across the black of the t-shirt before, and he thought it had something to do with a comic book hero or something similar. With a thought, his jacket changed to the same basic duster design that he had seen.

"How's that?" Harry asked as he modeled his handiwork.

"Uh... yeah... that'll work," Kara muttered as she took in the well-muscled figure that the tight shirt revealed.

"Should I see about getting a jet then?" the wizard questioned.

Shayera shook her head. "The teleporter's faster," she explained.

"Deal," Harry answered. Etching a slight bow, he added, "See you there," and disappeared.

"Well, you can't say he doesn't know how to make an exit," Kara pointed out, already hurrying towards her cabin aboard the Watchtower.

As the two older women followed her path at a slower pace, Shayera asked, "So, tell me. Why did you look like a constipated chipmunk when coffee was brought up?"

"What?" the dignified Amazon princess exclaimed, "I did not!"

"Yes, you did," the Thanagarian insisted, "now give."

Sighing, Diana asked, "Do you remember the last time Wally got a sugar high?"

"Yes..." Shayera answered slowly, cringing at the memory.

"Well, he's not the only one who should be banned from caffeinated products."

"You can't mean...!" the invisibly winged woman interjected.

Diana nodded. "Mm hmm... he was skipping. And singing. Badly."

After waiting for an eternity in the space station's teleportation room, Harry decided to investigate how such a feat as apparition could be done mechanically. Unfortunately for the bridge crew, this meant receiving many questions, not all of which were related to the topic at hand. When that mode of entertainment failed, Harry found an excellent substitute in staring matches against the current bridge supervisor, J'on J'onzz, the Martian Manhunter.

Needless to say, it was with many sighs of relief that Harry was distracted from his inquiry by the arrival of his three escorts for the evening. It appeared that each of the women was dressed in casual wear, with Kara going so far as to put her hair back in a ponytail.

"Is everyone ready?" Harry asked. They each gave an affirmative nod, and Diana instructed the technician to send the four to the filed coordinates for the sorceress Zatanna.

When the momentary flash of light faded, Harry found himself standing next to the women in an otherwise unoccupied alley. "That's... different. How does that thing target a destination?" Harry asked.

"Computer system with geographical maps and a coordinate database," the disguised Hawkgirl answered.

"Hmm..." Harry muttered to himself, "The Professor really needs to get a computer."

"What?" Diana asked.

Harry returned from his introspection. "Oh nothing," he assured the woman, "just random thoughts. So... where's this Zatanna perform at exactly?"

Shayera jerked her thumb out to the side. "Just around the corner." The quartet waded through the sea of humanity and eventually drifted to the ticket window. When informed of the production's entrance fee, Harry retrieved his wallet from his back pants' pocket. Opening the leather binder, he began rapidly flipping through various colored pieces of paper while muttering. "Britain... Germany... Italy... Russia... Australia... Ah! The States!" The wizard passed the attendant a few green slips of paper and the group made their way to their seats, as it was nearly show time.

"Haven't you ever heard of traveler's checks?" Kara asked. "Or credit cards, for that matter."

"Well... yes, but it's never been a real issue," Harry answered. "I don't do all that much shopping, any way. For that matter, I can keep up with the bills just fine and I've yet to meet a person desperate enough to try to rob me."

As they continued searching through the masses for their assigned seats, Shayera noted, "It's kind of strange, really. You'd think that somebody would recognize one of us. I mean, Diana's still wearing her bracelets for crying out loud!"

The Amazon in question tucked her muscled forearms out of sight while smiling guiltily.

Harry held his hands behind his back as he rocked back and forth, whistling innocently all the while.

"What did you do now?" Shayera asked exasperatedly.

"Everyone might be ignoring you because someone placed a notice-me-not charm on all three of you," Harry remarked idly.

"So we're like... invisible?" Kara blurted.

Harry shook his head. "No, they can see you just fine which is why they aren't trying to walk through you. It's just that their minds don't process any of the details about you."

"Cool!" Kara remarked. "What else can you do?"

"Whatever I can imagine, I suppose," Harry finally decided.

"Anything?" she asked wide eyed.

"Well, within reason," the wizard clarified. "I can't, say, conjure a planet or resurrect the dead, but I can create simple objects and mechanisms, transfigure most items, apply charms to static objects, and brew the simpler potions; basic stuff like that..."

"Awesome!" the girl exclaimed, a sentiment silently shared by her older teammates. "So, if I asked you to do something for me, do I have to sacrifice something to you in return or dance around a bonfire naked, or something?"

Harry thought about the first part of her query. "Well, despite what you've heard, only the truly deep magic, like rituals, require that kind of preparation." The rest of her query suddenly impacted with his skull. "As for the... uhm... other thing, that's... ah... not really necessary either," Harry stuttered.

Sensing how distracted the wizard became, Kara threw away her upbringing in Kansas away and smirked. "Oh..." she simpered, "and I was so looking forward to stripping down and getting sweaty! Are you sure that I don't have to?"

Harry nodded his head jerkily.

The blonde stepped right up against him and stretched up to look at him. "Are you really sure?" she pressed.

"Positive," he answered uneasily.

"Oh well," she said in a normal tone as she sashayed away from him. "Pity. It could have been fun."

Harry's eyes narrowed as he realized that she had been playing with him. His inner Marauder demanded reparation.

"Ow!" the girl yelped as she began furiously rubbing the affected part of her rump. "Who pinched me?"

Harry quickly cleared his mind as the Shangri La monks had taught him. Not making eye contact, he started humming one of his favorite

Himalayan hymns as he sedately strode towards their seats—or rather, as sedately as a java'd up wizard could manage, which wasn't that much, really.

"You should know that he's at least eight times as old as you are," Shayera noted idly, "if not more."

Diana nodded. "And we really don't know anything about him," she added.

"Hey," Kara interrupted, "he can take everything I can throw at him and still toss me on my butt, he's apparently long-lived—which is convenient for me, and he's got a sense of humor. Not to mention that he helped get me to the beautiful Las Vegas. Unless he's trying to take over the world or already married, I'm not going to get too fussy on the fine details. Now, if you'll both excuse me, I've got a magician to make uncomfortable." With that said, the disguised Supergirl stomped off in the same direction as Harry.

"This has all the makings of being an excellent show," Hawkgirl pointed out to her teammate.

"Definitely action packed," the Amazon concurred. "It's a good thing we have such close seats."

The currently 'unwinged' woman suddenly smiled wickedly. "And who knows...? Zatanna's production might be worth watching, too!"

As it turned out, Zatanna did put on a spectacular display, and the now-four leaguers enjoyed it tremendously. During the course of the former, the eldest two members of the League also got to witness the second hit of the evening: the twenty-year-old Kara Kent and her emerging feminine wiles versus the indeterminately aged Mr. Black and his determination to prove she had no effect on him.

As for the wizard himself, he found a 'non magic' magic show to be fascinating, and vowed to share the memory with the muggle-obsessed Arthur Weasley someday. After a spectacular conclusion—which happened to give Harry a few new ideas to discuss with the other members of Black Ink—the quartet made their way backstage and to the sorceress's dressing room. Seeing as how the performer was still out conversing with members of the audience, the group let themselves into the unlocked room.

"Whoa!" Kara exclaimed, taking in all of the unfamiliar items. Amongst the magical bric-a-brac, the young Argosian's attention eventually migrated to the crystal ball resting upon the dressing room's table. "Hey! Check this out!" Staring at the glass sphere, the girl wondered aloud, "Do you suppose you can really see the future on one of those things?"

Harry, who was not nearly as enthusiastic about a magical residence as the female heroine, snorted. "Unlikely," he answered, "most of those are just glass balls with some mist added to placate divination frauds. The chances of that one being the genuine article are very slim. See, I'll show you," he offered, laying his hand over the sphere. The instant he came into contact with the mystical object, however, his zippo started vibrating in his pants' pocket. Shocked that the communications device was functioning after his many failed attempts earlier, Harry released the glowing ball and dug out the portable Floo connection. Once his hand left the orb, however, the Zippo went dormant once more.

"Strange..." Harry murmured. The little device normally vibrated until he accepted the call. On a whim, he laid his other hand back on top of the glass object—and the Zippo began vibrating again. "Very strange," he decided. Activating the device, Harry questioned, "Hello?"

"Mr. Black! You're alive!" a nearly hysterical female voice yelled. Harry blinked confusedly as the three women present were trying to figure out how—and more importantly, why—voices were coming from a cigarette lighter. The fact that said lighter was currently emitting a bright emerald flame was a sticking point as well.

"Uhhh... I was the last time I checked..." Harry finally answered. "Henchgirl?"

"Yes...?" the Potions mistress queried anxiously.

"Why exactly does that surprise you?" Harry asked.

"Oh!" she squeaked. "No reason."

"Henchgirl..." the wizard sternly warned.

Harry heard a sharp intake of breath on the other side of the floo connection, and he could almost see the young woman wringing her hands nervously. "It's just... I thought that the Professor... but he thought that I... and neither of us remember changing... sometime during the previous test..."

Harry shook his head at the stream of consciousness. "Calm down, Henchgirl," Harry said levelly. "Just tell me what's the matter."

"Okay," she said shakily, "sometime after our last test with Tinkerbelle—you know, the green hairless cat -, one of the settings on our machine was skewed. When you tested it, you went to the Island's coordinates... just not the right waveform," Henchgirl finished uneasily.

Harry raised one eyebrow in inquiry. "Meaning..." he questioned.

"Well," she began to explain, "In layman's terms... there are an infinite number of possibilities, or dimensions, in the universe since there are an infinite number of directions for it to go. Now, all of these possibilities are operating simultaneously and in the same location, so they need some way of not overlapping each other; hence the waveform theory. Each of these 'dimensions' are vibrating at a different frequency so they don't intersect."

Harry nodded to himself. "So I... vibrated off course, is that it?"

"Essentially," the woman replied.

"And now I'm in another dimension...?" Harry offered weakly, feeling that warm, fuzzy, coffee-induced feeling vanish suddenly.

"Yep!" she chirped, happy that he had followed along.

"Well, that certainly explains a few things," Harry said to himself. "And you couldn't get me back?" he asked aloud.

Henchgirl sounded melancholic as she pleaded, "We didn't know which possibility to extract you from. But don't worry," she pledged, "that's why I sent out that floo call. Now that you've established contact, I know exactly where you are."

"So you or the Professor can retrieve me now, then?" Harry asked hopefully.

"I'm sorry," she confessed, "but the machine melted down right after you went through, which is why we couldn't track you. The Professor is down in the laboratory right now building a new model. He's vowed to work night and day until it's finished."

"There's no need for him to ruin his health," Harry protested. "I'm fine; and there's no rush. There are a few things in this... reality that I'd like to see anyway, so take your time."

"We'll get you back as soon as we can!" she promised. "And we've upgraded our Zippos," she added. "I've just added your location's frequency, so we should be able to talk to each other at any time without whatever you're using now to boost your signal. Hopefully, we'll be able to transmit matter over the connection soon."

Harry heard a loud clatter over the connection.

"It sounds like the Professor's had another accident," Henchgirl sighed audibly.

"You better go check on him," Harry coaxed. "We can talk later."

"Bye, Mr. Black," the magical engineer called out. "Don't drink and go 'Roo hunting!" she yelled before the flame flickered and died.

Harry grumbled something that the other women thought was, "It was only once!" The wizard looked lost in thought as he unconsciously slid the zippos back into his pocket. "Another dimension, huh?" he muttered. "Well, that explains why there're so many metahumans and virtually no wizards."

The wizard groaned as the immensity of the situation dawned on him. "I need a drink," he finally decided.

"How about you start with who you all are?" a female voice responded. Harry looked to its source and found the female performer and part-time Justice League member—who happened to be deceptively holding her wand loosely in one hand.

Harry quickly omitted Zatanna from the charms' effects surrounding the other three leaguers. "My apologies, Miss. I believe you have already met these three, and you may call me Mr. Black."

"I see," the sorceress finally acknowledged. Choosing to ignore the topic of his magical disguise preventing any firm identification—he apparently had the League's backing after all, if not their complete trust - she began taking off her top hat, bow tie, and other costume implements. "And what can I do for you?"

Harry shrugged. "I'm on vacation for the foreseeable future and wanted to see the Vegas nightlife. Shayera suggested starting with your show. It was very entertaining, by the way. I thought it very interesting how many substitutions you made for real magic."

The woman looked over her shoulder. "And what makes you think that there was a distinction?"

The transplanted wizard just smiled. "I'm something of a wizard myself. I can generally spot the genuine article. Anyway, they wanted to come back here and check up with you. Personally, I was thinking of picking up a couple of drinks, trying my hand at cards, and calling it quits for the night. Any suggestions?"

"The Black Cat's a good choice," Zatanna admitted. "If you'll give me a few minutes to get changed, I can point it out to you."

Realizing the unspoken request for males to vacate the premises, Harry nodded at the woman. "If they're all right with it, I don't mind if you tag along," he responded as he stepped outside and pulled the door shut behind him.

Zatanna whirled her wand around the room, quickly locking the door and setting up a privacy bubble around the four women. "Okay," the League's magician demanded as she pulled her blouse over her head, "who's Mr. Tall, dark, and magically adept?"

The others quickly filled her in on what they had witnessed, as well as their speculations. As she was pulling a pair of tight black jeans on, Zatanna summarized, "So, let me get this straight. We have a male of unknown nationality and age, who talks just like a Vegas native but who you've heard use British slang, who took out three hefty bad guys before they had a chance to retaliate, and," the

woman paused, "and he has somehow cloaked his identity so that none of us can give a detailed description. Not to mention several other little magic tricks. Which, I might add, sounds like some serious mojo. Any ideas on who we're dealing with here?"

"Nothing definite," Diana admitted ruefully.

"Fabulous!" Zatanna snorted as she slid her arms into a stylish black leather jacket. "Well, let's see where this goes." Zatanna waved her wand again to dispel the wards before tucking it in her sleeve. The sorceress opened the door to reveal the mysterious Mr. Black, who seemed to be passing the time by reading a book entitled 'Everything You Will Ever Need to Know While Traveling Around the Multiverse'. Strangely enough, the manuscript bore a rather large red button, with the words 'Don't Panic' engraved on it, on the front cover.

"Shall we go?" she prompted after deciding that, no, she really didn't want to know. An instant later found the sorceress accompanied by one tall male figure, the large tome sliding effortlessly out of sight and into his jacket's pocket. Slightly impressed despite herself, Zatanna smirked and said, "I thought that I'd start you off light..."

The Las Vegas nightlife, Harry realized, was decidedly loud. And bright. He also found a fair share of rude people, one of whom nearly flattened Zatanna as he ducked into an alleyway without even an apology for the collision.

Following the stage performer's lead, the quintet navigated the crowded sidewalks until they arrived at a stylish casino/bar furnished in a glossy black. "I give you... the Black Cat!" Zatanna exclaimed loftily.

"Oh, slot machines!" Kara squeed.

"Careful," Shayera warned, though she was smiling, "your farm roots are showing."

"I bet these are rigged, too," Harry said dismissively.

"Well, the odds of winning are rather small," Diana offered.

"Of winning are small?" Harry asked disbelievingly. Turning to Kara, he held out his hand. "Here, I'll show you. Do you have a couple of quarters?"

"Yeah..." she fished four silvery coins from her pants' pocket. Harry accepted the money before putting one coin in each of four adjacent machines. He then walked back down the line, pulling each of the machines' arms. "Now watch," Harry ordered as he turned his back to the gambling devices.

Barely a moment later, a cacophony of light and sound blared to light behind the wizard as the machines began dispensing their payloads. Carefully stepping over the heaping mound of coins, Harry held his hands out in a 'what can you do?' gesture. "See what I mean? Rigged. Now, I wonder if they have any roulette tables... those are supposed to be fun." He started wondering towards the inside of the building, only to stop at Kara anxiously calling his name.

"Wait!" she ordered. "What about all of this?"

Harry just glanced at the piles of hard cash dispassionately. "It was your investment. Do whatever you want with it." Putting the issue out of his mind, the wizard began looking for a more interesting game table - or a wetbar, he wasn't too picky - leaving an ecstatic teenager and three disbelieving women.

"How in the world did he do that?" Shayera demanded, never taking her eyes off the mound of money. "What kind of spell can do that?"

"If there is a spell for that, I don't know it," Zatanna admitted. "And I didn't sense him using any magic either."

"Nor did I see any device which might have done this," Diana added.

"He had to have done something!" the redhead protested. "Nobody's that lucky!"

"There must be over four thousand dollars here!" Kara exclaimed. "Now I can get that car I saw..." she trailed off for a moment in thought before her eyes bugged out. "A car! They use vehicles for prizes here, don't they?" she demanded of the Vegas native.

"Yes," she answered bemusedly. The young blonde-haired woman looked—if possible—even more ecstatic, and the older women wondered whether the girl would need a sedative in the near future. Before she could go tearing off after her humanoid good luck charm, however, the group was joined by a member of the casino's staff.

"Good evening, ladies," the uniformed man greeted, "and congratulations. Now, who is our lucky winner this evening?"

"Our friend won this," Diana supplied.

"But he gave it to me!" Kara added energetically.

The employee carefully hid a smile at the girl's enthusiasm. "Well, I need his signature on this form for our records. Do you know where he is?"

"He mentioned visiting your roulette tables," Zatanna informed the man, much to his private satisfaction. The roulette wheels were some of their biggest earners, not the least reason being a few 'in-house' modifications. With any luck, they could recoup their losses on this same group before the night was out. Fetching a nearby bucket, the man helped to scoop up the proceeds.

"Well, if you'll follow me, we'll just check in on your gentleman friend," the employee offered graciously. He swiftly led the group between the other gamblers and to the sections farther back where the high-classed play resided. Making a last sharp turn, the assemblage found them selves watching a group of four people, one of whom had entered this building with them.

"So, I just pick one of these squares and put my chips on it, and if that ball lands in the same slot on the wheel, then I win?" they heard Harry ask.

"Now you got it!" one of the other gamblers said jovially.

"Alright," Harry said decisively before slamming his mug down on the table and putting his entire stack of chips on number thirty-one.

"Are you sure about that, sir?" the table's attendant asked. "That is a hundred dollars, after all."

Harry waived off the man's concern. "I'm positive. The whole lot—number thirty-one."

"I'll give you this, kid," the other gambler barked. "You've got spunk!" He tossed a few of his own chips down.

"Okay... hold your bets!" the table keeper ordered before the wheel spun and the ball shot into the cylinder. After several anxious seconds, the ball dropped—right into slot number thirty one. "And thirty one's a winner!"

There was some applause as Harry was presented with several more chips. "Would the winner care to try again?" the croupier asked as he tried to recoup his losses.

Harry nodded. "Yeah. Let's try the other side of the board. Everything on number zero." He moved the chips accordingly.

"Any takers?" the other man pleaded. When there were none, he gingerly spun the wheel again, tapping his foot repeatedly as the ball slowly came to rest—in slot zero. "Congratulations," the man finally said.

"Thanks," Harry responded with equal regret as he raked his cash chips into a bucket.

"Does sir wish to play again?" the man asked hesitantly.

"No, I don't think so," Harry decided as he scooped up his mug and drained Vega's excuse for alcohol. "I know when I'm in a rut. I think I'll give the card tables a look, though."

Harry waved off a course of "good byes" from the other gamblers before his attention was attracted by the four ladies and their escort.

Getting right to the point, the casino's attendant asked, "Are you the gentleman who won the four jackpots out front?"

Harry sighed audibly before reluctantly nodding. "I'm afraid so," he admitted. "Is there a problem?"

"No, sir," the employee answered uneasily while eyeing the extremely full pail at the customer's feet, "we merely require your signature on a few forms."

Harry went through the bureaucratic red tape before walking away from the gob-smacked attendant with the four women in tow.

After the group left, the slots' attendant signaled for a replacement and then dragged the roulette croupier off to the side.

"What was that all about?" he demanded. "Do you have the slightest idea how much money that man just pocketed off of your area? Why didn't you use the 'added feature'?"

"I did, Sir," the lower employee protested. "I don't understand it. I tapped the control for number sixteen—I know I did! But somehow, the ball got redirected both times!"

The senior supervisor thought for a moment about how the mark could have out-cheated them. "Did you see him reach into his pocket at any time? Or signal to someone in the crowd."

"No, Sir!" he answered.

His boss nodded. "Okay. I'll have him put under surveillance; he'll slip up sooner or later and then we'll get him!"

"Can I see that?" Shayera asked. Harry nodded and handed the redhead the bucket. "Dear Thanagar! That's a lot of chips!" the sometimes gambler breathed.

Zatanna coughed disbelievingly. "Two winning straight-ups in a row off of a hundred? There has to be close to a hundred thirty thousand in there!"

"Hmm," Harry said, "I'm not familiar with the American money system. Is that a lot?"

His answer was met with four bug-eyed looks. "It's... a good chuck of change for most of us," Zatanna conceded. "This much would probably buy a good-sized house."

Harry nodded and withdrew half a dozen chips from the bucket. "Alright then," Harry offered, "one of you can keep it then. I've already got my castle; I don't really need another house." And with that said he was gone once more, leaving slightly in excess of one hundred thirty five thousand dollars behind without any seeming interest in its distribution.

"Uh..." Shayera stuttered, "Did I miss something?"

"I know I did!" Zatanna exclaimed. "I was watching closely this time, and I know that he didn't use any magic I'm familiar with."

"Nobody's that lucky!" Kara said, still blindsided by the hefty bucket of coins she was casually holding in one hand.

Diana, not at all fazed by the amount of wealth due to her upbringing, was instead following Harry's receding figure with a speculative gaze. "I didn't know that Eutucia¹ had a son..." she murmured.

Harry was finally asked to leave the building an hour or so later, after another unexplainable windfall at the card tables. The wizard was initially encouraged when his first bet of three chips was taken only moments after he sat down, but the feeling of elation waned when he won the next hand, immediately gaining the chips back along with several of their friends. His next dozen attempts to give the extra chips back also proved to be in vain, leaving him surrounded by the unattractive plastic counters.

As the group cashed out and left the establishment, Zatanna clasped him on the back and proclaimed, "I've never seen anything like that before! How did you do it?"

"I'm sorry," Harry said dully. "I've tried to have a normal holiday - you wouldn't believe how hard I've tried - but weird things like that always seem to pop up no matter what I do."

The sorceress blinked at the unexpected reply. Speaking for herself, she was ecstatic. Not only did she get to meet another league magician with more of a personality than Dr. Fate or Jason Blood, but she also netted nearly a quarter million just for teaching the man the rules to Texas Hold-em! "Oh, don't apologize on my account! I enjoyed it!" The others made similar announcements, and for

possibly similar reasons. Zatanna still couldn't believe that the uptight officious Princess Diana knew how to throw dice!

Harry suddenly looked around as he paused by an occupied bench. "I thought that it never rains around here," he stated inquiringly. The other women looked away from their own accruements for the evening and discovered that it had come a slight shower while they were inside.

"Precipitation is rare in Nevada, but this is our rainy season," Zatanna explained. "It'll drizzle for the next couple of weeks, but I doubt we'll see anything major."

Harry nodded his head in reply. Seeing the shabbily dressed man seated upon the bench next to him, Harry suspected that the person was likely one of the city's poor that made the alleys their home. Deciding to do his good deed for the day, Harry handed the man one of the hundred dollar bills from his share of the winnings. "Here you go, mate. Be careful later; it's liable to be slippery out."

Not catching the man's reply, Harry just dipped his head and set off again, whistling all the while. A few blocks later, however, he felt nature call. Making his excuses, he doubled back to a public restroom he had spotted.

The Question was - in a word - confused. Not five hours ago, Batman had tracked him down aboard the Watchtower and 'requested' that he observe a suspicious character that was currently on the watchtower. Grateful for the new case, the disguised detective quickly tracked the unknown male down. He then stealthily followed his quarry, even though the suspect had teleported a time or two. Learning of the plans to visit Las Vegas—a very shady city indeed—the investigator quickly worked up an appropriate disguise and followed the posse planet side. After a few stops, he tracked the group to the Black Cat, one of the upper echelon casinos.

All very routine for a first-class detective such as himself.

Having his mark approach him and slip him cash, however, was not. Giving his objective a few moments head start, the Question was just fixing to start again when a loud splat followed by screaming distracted him. Making his way behind the brightly lit establishment to the much dimmer back alley, the League's number two detective

found himself observing a crime scene. On the ground was a male figure in dark clothing with a scarf tied over his face. Aside from the obvious, there were two other thoughts to consider. One, the man wasn't moving, and appeared to be unconscious. Two, he was apparently holding a long serrated knife in his hand when he fell. Before he could question the alley's conscious witness—assumedly the woman whose scream had alerted him—two of the local police force had entered the alley. He quickly hid himself so he could observe the proceedings.

Following proper procedure, one of the officers called in the incident and requested medical assistance. Shortly thereafter, his partner attempted to right the unconscious man before he noticed the suspicious attire. The two police officers suddenly became more alert, and paid closer attention to the crime scene. Another look at the discarded knife yielded some surprising evidence.

After relieving himself of a large volume of coffee and alcohol, Harry returned to his companions. Due to the late hour, they decided to call an end to the night's festivities. With a pleased goodbye, Zatanna left to return to her apartment while the rest sought a secluded spot. Finding an empty alley, Shayera contacted the orbiting Watchtower and the quartet was teleported aboard. Harry then removed their magical disguises since they were no longer in the public eye. Upon finding out that Harry still did not have lodging, the two younger leaguers left to correct the oversight.

"Well, that was very interesting," Diana confessed to her female teammate.

"More than you know," a gruff voice said from behind her. The two women turned quickly to find the one and only Batman lurking behind them.

"What do you mean?" Diana demanded.

"Follow me," he said in reply, before doing an about-face and heading towards their private conference room. Rolling their eyes at their stoic teammate, the pair emulated his swift pace.

It surprised even the Question when it was discovered that this man was the previously unidentified 'Slasher'. There had been several cases in the recent weeks where one or two people—usually

women—were attacked by an unknown person or persons. Upon engagement, the 'Slasher' would use a jagged knife to disembowel his or her victims before robbing them. The officers on the scene concluded that this man was the same horrible murderer, and speculated that he met his match on the slippery fire escape. It was assumed that he lay in wait there for a likely victim, and slipped on the metal surface as he rushed to intercept this particular woman. The severe bruising and half-dozen broken bones backed up the officers' theory.

'Convenient,' the Question brooded. 'Maybe too convenient.' Stealing away, the Question retrieved his JLA communicator and activated the unit. "Batman?"

Batman and the two women met the other three 'available' members of the original seven at the conference room. "What is it now, Bruce?" Clark Kent asked. "I was in the middle of helping a stalled oil tanker get into port."

"Some information regarding your newest buddy has come to light," he said darkly.

"What do you mean?" Diana demanded.

"I had the Question observe this 'Mr. Black'," Batman admitted. "He just reported your little field trip a few minutes ago. He's on his way now."

"I never saw him," Shayera disagreed. "And how did he even recognize us anyway? We were disguised at the time."

"True," Bruce allowed. "He was unable to visually identify you due to unknown complications. However, you all were carrying your communicators; he determined your identities based on their unique signal. And as for your other comment, it appears that Mr. Black was more observant. He approached the Question outside 'the Black Cat'."

"Wait," Clark interjected, "what 'field trip'?"

The two women looked at one another before reluctantly explaining their—and by extension, Kara's—whereabouts to her overprotective cousin.

Flash whistled appreciatively as Clark sighed. "Well, I suppose she would have gotten curious about gambling sooner or later," the Man of Steel finally admitted. "I'll have a talk with her. How much did she lose?"

At this, the two females grinned. "Oh, you misunderstand," Shayera said smugly, "she didn't actually do any gambling; she just reaped the proceeds. Mr. Black was the one gambling, and he didn't lose. All night."

"What?" he blurted.

Diana nodded happily. "He won somewhere in the excess of 1.2 million dollars before the casino finally kicked him out. He kept a couple hundred thousand for himself and let us split the rest."

"Whoa!" Flash whispered admiringly. "How'd he do it? Did he start throwing the mojo around, or did he take the Bat approach and gizmo them out of their money."

"As far as we could tell, he didn't cheat," Shayera said disbelievingly despite having watched him in action herself. "Diana thinks he's some unknown offspring of the goddess of luck!" she added teasingly.

"Well, he could be!" she maintained. "He has her bright green eyes, and I've never seen that particular shade in anyone who wasn't descended from her. The black hair makes it even more likely!"

Superman looked like he still failed to make some connection. "So... you're telling me... that my little cousin... snuck off to Vegas and came home with a quarter million dollars?"

"Pretty much," Shayera agreed.

Clark just shook his head. "Moving back on topic, why are we here?"

"Yeah, what Supes said," Wally agreed.

"I'll let the Question answer that himself," the disguised Bruce Wayne supplied. "He should be here momentarily."

True to his word, the second investigator appeared a few minutes later and filled the council in on his mission, including how he was spotted at the end of the evening and the cryptic message that Mr. Black had given him. He then went on to describe the incident behind the 'Cat'.

After he stopped talking, Diana blurted out, "What are you saying? He was with us the whole night! He couldn't have done this!"

Shayera looked similarly skeptic. "Who was it that he supposedly attacked."

The Question threw a blown up copy of a photo he took in the alley. "That's the infamous 'Slasher'. He likes to cut his victims up - who are normally women, by the way."

"That's the same man who ran into Zatanna when we first entered!" Diana exclaimed. "The one who ducked into the alley afterwards!" Shayera nodded in agreement.

"So, he had a face and a probable location by then," the Question said to himself aloud. "You're sure that you can account for every single minute of this evening. Mr. Black was never out of sight?"

"Well, he went to the restroom after we left the casino, but he was only gone for a couple of minutes—five at the most," Diana submitted.

The two detectives looked at one another. "I don't know who this guy is," the Question frankly admitted, "but he's good. Very good. Within the span of a few minutes, he was able to track an elusive criminal down, dispatch him with several disabling injuries, arrange for the whole operation to look like an accident, and then return without raising the slightest scrutiny. He's definitely a professional."

"Wait a minute!" Flash demanded. "If he's some sort of super assassin or spy or something, then why did he come right out and warn you just before he did it?" he asked the faceless Question.

"He's playing with us," Batman growled. "This whole thing: pretending to not notice his tail, the gambling stunts, taking down this punk underneath five Leaguers' noses..." One gauntleted fist

beat on the table. "He's flaunting that we can't keep up with him!" he grimaced.

"I would have thought that something like this would be right up your alley. Isn't this your normal *modus operandi*?" Superman asked teasingly. "What's wrong... jealous?"

Batman glared at the taller man. "I'm concerned that a being of unknown power and ability can so easily pull off a deception of this magnitude with no preparation. If he can do something like this on a whim, what else is he capable of doing without our being aware?"

"Tell you what," John Stewart finally said, "I've got tomorrow's first response team. I'll take him on any missions we might have and try to get a better handle on the scope of his abilities. In the meanwhile, I've got to go."

"Date with Vixen?" Shayera asked under her breath. Whether fortunate or not, she remained unheard and the meeting broke up a few minutes later.

As Diana and Shayera were making their way to their own rooms, Wally ran up and asked, "Hey, the next time you guys go to Sin City, can you get me a few bags of cash, too?"

[1] Eutykhia was honored as the goddess of good fortune, luck, success and prosperity.

Previous Chapter
Terminal Justice

Chapter 2: He's Playing With Us
by Overkill

Next Chapter

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Chapter 3: The Horseman Black by Overkill

Next Chapter

Disclaimer: This is a cross between JLA (Season 5) and Rorschach's Blot's Make A Wish Story. Harry Potter is owned by JK Rowling and various publishers. Henchgirl, The Professor, and other such objects are Rorschach's creation. DC Comics own the Justice League and associated characters/plot devices. The lack of plot, however, can be attributed to me.

The Horseman Black

Having found vacant quarters for Harry the previous night, Kara excused herself after informing him of her own quarters' location. Harry then set out to make himself comfortable in his new environment, including transfiguring the bed, conjuring some extra furniture, and retrieving certain necessities from his trunk. Satisfied with his new room, Harry decided to rest for a few hours.

Rising again early the next morning, the wizard did his normal morning ritual before seeking out the helpful blonde girl and breakfast, though not necessarily in that order. However, due to a slight navigational error, Harry found himself visiting the off-duty Supergirl after all.

Knocking on her door, Harry heard some rustling before the sound of steps approached the door.

"Who is it?" a sleepy voice demanded crossly.

"You mean you don't remember me?" Harry cheerfully called through the door.

"Oh, Rao," she moaned, "you're a morning person, too?"

"Yep!" Harry chorused. "So, watcha doin?"

"What time is it?" she asked groggily.

Checking his watch, Harry informed her that it was 7:45 a.m. This information elicited several interesting epithets, a few of which Harry

hurried to write down – he wasn't entirely sure if some of them were even physically possible, even allowing for magic. He'd have to ask Tonks someday.

'On second thought,' he decided, 'perhaps I should have someone else ask her.' Shaking his head as if to throw away images of raging metamorphamagi, Harry asked, "Is there something wrong?"

"I'm late!" she shouted, and he heard the sound of drawers being thrown open. "I've got a convention to visit this morning and I'm late!"

"Okay, I'll let you get ready. Bye, Kara!" Harry called. He received no reply as the sounds of the room's shower started. Deciding that he wasn't going to have a repeat of yesterday, Harry retrieved his wand from his back pocket and used the modified compass charm 'Point Me Cafeteria'.

Allowing the metal rod to swing around on his palm, Harry began to follow the indicator in search of sustenance. On the way, he happened to cross paths with Superman, who greeted him and inquired as to what he was doing.

"Oh, I'm trying to find the cafeteria," Harry answered helpfully. "You know, you people should invest in some signs or maps... something!"

The colorful man nodded at him and gave him the quickest route to his culinary destination.

"Thanks, mate," Harry waved and continued on his way.

The costumed alter ego of Clark Kent smoothly navigated through the morning crowd in the Watchtower. He had planned to confront Kara regarding her youthful rebellion the previous evening, but Lois had signaled that she was in trouble. When he showed up at her apartment, however, the only perpetrators were a can of whipped cream and a length of silk rope. He didn't realize that the violet-eyed reporter even had such a kinky side, especially when she... never mind. Anyway, the Man of Steel was unable to meet with his 'cousin' before this morning.

Turning a corner, he nearly collided with one of the people occupying his thoughts.

"Good morning, Mr. Black," he greeted levelly. Seeing the Punisher-clad figure holding a metallic rod in the palm of his hand, he couldn't restrain himself from asking, "What exactly are you doing with that... thing, if you don't mind my asking?"

Strangely enough, the man apparently was somehow using it to locate the cafeteria. The Kryptonian had never had a problem moving about the station, but he supposed that this very... unique individual had a point. Nodding in agreement, Clark gave the newest league member the fastest route back to the mess hall before setting off after Kara again. Finally reaching her apartment, Clark rapped on the steel door.

"I'm almost done!" Kara shouted. Finishing the last of her hygienic duties at superhuman speed, Kara threw on her uniform and literally flew to the door. "Well, Mr. Black, you certainly are-" the girl said coyly as she opened the door to find her cousin on the other side. "CLARK? What are you doing here?" she demanded.

"Never mind me," he answered. "What we should be discussing is you, and why you were expecting your little gambling friend at the door."

Rolling her eyes at the overprotective routine, she slid past him and shut her door. "If you must know," she said patiently, "he just left a few minutes ago when I started getting ready."

Not giving any thought as to how her innocent comment was causing the Man of Steel's fists to subtly clench, she continued, "Now, if you'll excuse me, I've got a convention in Japan I need to be getting to."

"Yeah," he said as mental images of the evil Mr. Black corrupting his innocent cousin filled his mind. "I've got some business to take care of myself."

"Well, good luck with that," she called out her shoulder as she hurried off. "See ya later!"

"Bye," Clark responded distractedly as dark thoughts began to percolate through his consciousness. He suddenly felt like having some breakfast.

Thankfully, Harry found the mess hall without incident and held the door for Diana, who was leaving. After she performed some sort of energetic wave involving lots of pointing, she gave Harry a bright smile before quickly walking away. Adding this to his list of things to have explained someday, Harry entered the dining hall and proceeded to gather an appetizing selection from the self-serve food bar.

Sadly, there seemed to be no coffee this morning, either. He saw the warming pads for the glass containers; he even smelled the evidence of their earlier presence. However, he couldn't ascertain the marvelous elixir's fate. Sighing heavily, he resigned himself to some sort of fruit juice and absconded with an out of the way table.

Towards the end of his meal, he was joined by the Green Lantern, who announced his presence with a warm, "You're going to be partnered with me today, Rookie."

"Good morning to you, too," Harry said through what was supposedly a biscuit. Personally, Harry thought that they were mistaken, but when in Rome...

Ignoring Harry's rejoinder, he continued his monologue. "Let's pack it up. I want to introduce you to the groundside Metro tower before our shift starts. Let's go."

Sighing to himself, Harry proceeded to stuff the rest of his plate's contents into his mouth before draining his glass. Swallowing hard, he cleared his mouth and cast a couple of charms to clean the dining implements. Leaving the like-new breakfast trappings on the table, Harry jumped to his feet. Gesturing to the closest exit, Harry grandiosely offered, "After you."

The pair followed the well-traveled path to the teleporters, and the senior Leaguer arranged for two one-way trips to the planet side installation.

Just as they were dematerializing, Harry could have sworn that he saw Superman come storming into the chamber.

'Ah well,' he decided. 'It was probably my imagination.'

True to his word, the Green Lantern was able to just finish a detailed tour of the Metro Tower before a League-level threat was announced. As clichéd as it sounded, they received word that a giant mutant turtle was terrorizing the downtown area of Tokyo, Japan. Acting quickly, Green Lantern rounded up Stargirl (Courtney Whitmore) and S.T.R.I.P.E. (her stepfather, Pat Dugan) for reinforcements and the four took a long-distance Javelin to assist. Quickly hitting supersonic speeds, the spaceflight-capable jet swiftly carried the group to the other side of the globe, where they easily located the source of the disturbance.

The authorities were already on hand, as well as the scientific crew who accidentally mutated the turtle in the first place. With their input, a plan was quickly formulated and launched. S.T.R.I.P.E. and Harry were to arrange the equipment necessary to reverse the mutation on an abandoned trash barge while Star Girl and Green Lantern got the civilians out of the way and herded the monster towards the trap.

Unfortunately, no plan goes exactly as intended. In this case, Stargirl got impatient and attempted to use her staff to drag the creature the remaining distance to the just-completed trap. Despite a yelled warning from her mecha father, the turtle – amazingly - blasted the girl out of the sky and onto a collision course with a building. Throwing his custom wand out, Harry Summoned the girl, thereby arresting her fall. The mechanical parent quickly took flight and intercepted his daughter before she could travel the entire distance to the barge, allowing Harry to turn his attention to the main reason they were there. In the confusion, the creature somehow managed to take flight. Between Harry and GL, they managed to wrestle the turtle away from the city itself and out to sea. Just as the turtle moved into position, Harry was preparing to Apparate away when a pair of slender arms slid under his own and he found himself suddenly floating above the turtle with a verifiable female body embracing him from behind.

"Need a lift?" Kara's voice asked teasingly from behind his head.

"Nice to see you, too," Harry answered in the same tone. Pointing the metallic wand at the turtle's gigantic shell, he repeatedly cast banishing charms at the creature until it literally 'hit the deck'.

S.T.R.I.P.E. then triggered the trap via remote, thereby reducing the animal to its former proportions and saving the city. Seeing that the crisis was over, the group rejoined and headed back to the mainland. Yet again disavowing Moody's warning, Harry proceeded to stow his virtually indestructible wand in his back pocket. He had initially considered changing his clothes back to his normal black robes, but he finally decided to keep the shirt/pant/duster ensemble from the previous evening.

The fact that Kara said she liked the Punisher look was completely irrelevant.

Harry heard and felt a giggle from his current means of transport before Supergirl asked, "So, is that a wand in your pocket or are you just happy to see me?"

Harry stifled a groan and shook his head. "You're enjoying this far too much."

"Hey," she protested teasingly, "I'm just finding it hard to believe that you can't fly, too."

"And what makes you think that I can't?" he asked with a smirk.

She raised one blond eyebrow. "You're not flying on your own right now," she pointed out to the amused wizard.

Harry just shrugged – as much as his current position would allow. "Maybe I like it where I am?"

"And maybe I'll just drop you in the Pacific?" the blonde-haired girl shot back.

"Could you two please stop?" Courtney demanded crossly.

"What?" the other two teenagers asked in unison.

'Creepy,' John observed to himself as the group came back down to Terra Firma.

"Arigato, everyone," Kara called out to the cheering civilians. "Thank you. Arigato."

Harry heard the other blonde girl's sarcastic comments from her position several feet behind them. "Arigato! Arigato!" Stargirl mocked. "How'd she get here, anyway?"

"Problems amongst the ranks?" Harry asked softly, just loud enough for the meta human at his back to pick up.

"She's had a chip on her shoulder when it came to me since the first day we met," Kara grumbled. "I just ignore her."

As the girl let him go, Harry just barely avoided being trampled by a mob of her prepubescent fans. Taking the opportunity to get out of the line of fire, Harry slinked over to the other three leaguers.

"What's with all the wannabes?" he heard Courtney ask.

The robotic S.T.R.I.P.E. thumbed over his broad metallic shoulder. "Probably here for the convention," her stepfather answered.

"Convention?" she repeated disbelievingly.

Green Lantern finished making his post-op sweep of the area just in time to overhear the girl's last comments. Fixing her with a green gaze, John Stewart pointed a finger and said, "When we get back to the Metro tower, you and I are going to have a long talk about grandstanding."

"Tell that to her!" the younger blond protested. "The little show-off stole my thunder!"

Unfortunately for the blonde crime fighter, one of the miniature Supergirl fanatics managed to hear her as well. Said half-pint proceeded to run over to the group and kick Stargirl in the shin.

"Don't talk about Supergirl!" the young fan said in broken English. "Supergirl can melt you with her eyes!"

"Big whoop!" Courtney retaliated. "My step dad here is a Mecha."

The kid turned around and disregarded the waving robot. "Mechas are so last year!" she said loftily as she flounced back to rejoin the fan girl pack.

"She's very big in Japan," Green Lantern said smugly.

The star-spangled teenager just crossed her arms and glowered slightly.

"I don't get it!" Kara said later as she was piloting under GL's instruction. "Why can't we just fly straight home?"

"Over the north pole is the straightest route, Rookie" her tutor informed her tiredly. The Argosian stuck her tongue out in retaliation.

In the back of the compartment, Courtney rolled her eyes at the blatant show of favoritism. "She's always 'blah blah blah, my cousin!'" she complained under her breath. 'Blah blah blah blah, my cousin'. Like we don't know who she means! Check me out – I'm Supergirl!"

Harry spoke up from his reclined window seat. "You know," he calmly informed the apparently envious girl, "the whole publicity thing is highly overrated. You're never left alone; everything you say and do is monitored and judged, before being twisted around and used against you. You can't go out and do anything in the public eye without disguising yourself beforehand. And then my personal favorite; all of your friends and family catch the flak from the people who feel somehow slighted by you – merely because they're your friends and family. Personally, I prefer anonymity; it's lower maintenance."

"Speaking from experience, I take it?" she asked bitingly.

Harry just gave a small mischievous smile before closing his eyes again. "You don't think that my parents named me 'Mr. Black', do you?"

"If you ask me," Pat offered, "the only thing that matters is that we all pulled through."

"Shut up, Pat!" she argued. "It wasn't World War III; it was a giant turtle!"

"Yeah!" Harry chuckled. "I'm gonna have to remember this one. I mean, I've seen giant chickens, giant ships, giant squids, giant

three-headed dogs, giant snakes – heck, even giant people! But I've never before encountered a giant turtle."

Her stepfather leaned closer to her. "If I was you, I wouldn't talk behind someone's back when they got super hearing."

Harry held up two fingers without even opening his eyes. "Another good point from the talking toaster."

The cockpit was silent after that for the next several minutes before the occupants were disturbed once more. This new interruption took the form of an electrical discharge, which surrounded the plane and fried the electronic flight controls.

"Kara, easy on the controls!" Lantern barked.

"I'm not doing anything!" she protested. The jet continued to plummet despite their combined efforts before being suspiciously pulled down a gaping hole in the icy ground. The plane continued to tumbled down the dark earthy shaft before finally exiting onto a grassy area adjacent to a forest.

Gathering their wits, the quintet extracted their selves from the wreckage. Finding themselves in an unknown area, both the heroines attempted to contact the orbiting Watchtower at the same instant, resulting in another confrontation which Kara finally won. Unfortunately, her efforts proved in vain as no connection could be made.

"Nothing," she reported glumly. Green Lantern then reported that his ring indicated their position as still being at the North Pole.

"Maybe somebody's North Pole," Pat retorted in his robotic voice. The group followed his finger to an overhead red sun.

"So, where the heck are we?" Kara asked finally.

"I can only guess that we're way, way underground," the former Marine theorized.

"And the exit would be...?" she questioned. Her question was bracketed by several loud growls. Startled, the leaguers looked up to find themselves surrounded by a group of strange two-legged

reptiles, which were saddled like horses. Upon these bizarre mounts were – what appeared to be – Snake men.

"Through them!" Green Lantern answered drolly.

"Not a problem!" Kara seconded as she sprinted ahead. As Lantern shielded the rest of the group from the mass, Supergirl engaged one of the lone riders. Circling around, she punched the creature as hard as she could – which had no effect aside from damaging her hand. Shaking off the shock, she dove to the ground and rolled away as the creature reared and attacked her former position.

"You guys, my powers aren't working!" she yelled worriedly.

"Ah..." Stargirl called in mock sympathy.

"I'm serious!" Kara protested. "I'm at half-strength, maybe less!"

"Not now!" Harry barked at the smiling staff-wielder before he Apparated in front of Kara and stunned both the reptiles – rider and transport.

"Thanks!" Kara said gratefully as Harry offered her his hand.

He pulled her quickly back to her feet before returning his attention to the fight. "Hey, I owed you one for the flight earlier anyway," he replied easily.

The rest of the league broke off and faced the creatures one-on-one, and finally defeated the first wave. Just as the ground troops were defeated, Kara announced the arrival of several airborne threats with a censured, "Oh, dang!"

Harry looked up to see a half-dozen more of the snakemen mounted on some breed of pterodactyl. Harry withdrew his wand grimly before putting some of his weather magic to good use, sending a potent windstorm to blow the second wave off course. As the flying threats recovered, Harry started summoning a storm cloud replete with lighting as backup.

Silently casting a sonorus on his throat, Harry addressed the reptiles in Parseltongue. "We mean you no harm, but if you continue, you will be destroyed!" He emphasized his threat with several loud

discharges of lightning. The wizard wasn't quite sure whether the humanoid riders took him seriously, but their mounts certainly did; the winged reptiles did an immediate about-face and flew away as fast as they possibly could.

The others approached him wide-eyed as Harry casually dispersed his impromptu thunderstorm. "What the heck was that?" Green Lantern demanded.

"Humanoid snakes?" Harry offered with a shrug.

The dark-skinned senior Lantern had to stifle a sigh at the other man's obtuseness. "I was referring to how you got rid of them."

"Oh," Harry said comprehendingly, "I told them that we weren't here to hurt them, but that I'd be having fried snake meat for dinner if they didn't skedaddle." At the looks of disbelief, Harry admitted, "It loses a bit in translation."

"Right," Lantern finally said, choosing not to pursue the impending headache.

Breaking the moment of silence, Pat scanned the immediate vicinity for further threats. "Yep, that's the last of 'em," he reported. A second later, "Oh, wait!"

A loud growl echoed from behind Kara. Harry wheeled around to see a large T-rex approach the weakened girl from behind. Wand still in hand, Harry reacted with the first spell that came to mind.

The angry red glare of an overcharged Reductor curse made contact with the predator a mere second later. On the positive side of things, the sole remaining threat was taken care of. On the other hand, the group was now covered in pulverized dinosaur innards.

"Oops," Harry said quietly. "Sorry about that."

Wiping a persistent glob off his face, Lantern just stared at him and answered, "Smooth move, hot shot."

Harry just smiled weakly and quickly cleaned the mess off the others before vanishing the excrement off his own clothing. "I might've used a wee bit too much power on that last one."

"I think that's a safe assumption!" Courtney complained.

"It worked, didn't it?" Kara defended him heatedly.

"You're a wizard!" a male voice called out. The group looked beyond the dinosaur's remains to see a strangely dressed man. He wore an iron helmet with white wings on either side and was otherwise unclothed save for boots and a loincloth.

Taking the initiative, Harry responded levelly, "Guilty as charged. Who are you?"

"Travis Morgan, warlord of Shambala," the man responded. "I've been expecting you."

Harry just groaned. "Here we go again," he muttered.

"What?" Kara asked confusedly.

Harry sighed and replied, "We're about to be conscripted to fight on the behalf of some impoverished, downtrodden village/town/nation against one or more power-hungry, maniacal, would-be dictators. What else?"

"It's a real pain being right all the time!" Harry complained a couple hours later. As he predicted, the so-called barbarian led the Justice League to Scarteras, one of the last remaining villages free of the tyranny of the evil wizard Deemos.

As they later discovered, Travis was the leader of the resistance and it was his witch daughter, Jennifer, who used magic to bring their plane down to the hidden valley. The two Morgans proceeded to inform them that Deemos used to be a minor nuisance, but recently had discovered energy weapons and was now set on conquering the world.

"Ah yes, the old take-over-the-world ploy," Harry muttered.

"Our world must have champions," Jennifer said unapologetically by way of explanation. "I cannot stand against his power; we hope that you can."

Harry just glared in reply.

"What my friend means to say is that we'll do everything we can to help," Kara interjected.

"That goes without saying," Harry said carefully, "but there are certain... courtesies that we magicians follow. Dragging us here and conscripting our aid is a severe breach of etiquette," he explained sharply. "Wizards have waged war for far less."

"What would you have done, if you were in my place?" the scantily clad witch retorted sharply.

Harry fixed her with another sharp glare and hissed, "Listen, Poppet; I've been in your place, and I solved my own problems! However, if I needed help, I would have just asked for it instead of twisting someone's arm until they agreed!"

She kept her defiant act for a few moments longer before caving. Dropping her head, she muttered, "I'm sorry. I didn't know what else to do, and I suddenly received this vision that a metal bird in the world above carried our salvation."

Kara thought she heard Harry mutter something about the universe's spittoon before he sighed audibly and replied, "Alright. Now that we're all here, tell us what we're facing. What are this... Deano's powers? What forces does he lead? What type of magical foci can he wield? Give us a little something to work with, at least!"

The picture they painted for Harry was that of an overambitious but underachieving Death Eater – nothing much to worry about. However, Travis also mentioned something about a great magic stone that warranted a closer look, seeing as how it was important enough to have monks guarding it. Morgan also reported that Deemos wanted it – badly.

Deciding unanimously that that was their next stop, the company headed to the monastery at the center of the village. Once they descended into the building's lower levels, they came upon its last guardian – Travis's friend and fellow king McKeiss of Keiro - who had personal knowledge of the stone. He claimed that he had fallen to the Black Death and was told to set his affairs in order. However, when the monks placed his fading body next to the rock, his illness

was cured – though at a price. Apparently, exposure to the stone's rays cost him his right forearm in exchange for his life.

Turning to face the locked doors, McKeiss signaled the attendants to reveal the artifact. The monks removed the restraints and slowly cranked the doors open to reveal their precious glowing green stone.

Kryptonite.

Seeing the jade radiation negatively affecting Kara, Harry quickly cast an appropriate shield over the fallen girl with Lantern bolstering his efforts a millisecond later. Meanwhile, S.T.R.I.P.E. hurriedly resealed the vault to remove the danger to his teammate.

Finally dropping her smug act, Courtney earnestly asked if Kara was okay as Harry picked the girl up and threw her arm around his shoulders as his arm wrapped around her waist to support her.

"Y-yeah..." the Argosian answered shakily, "but I've never seen a piece of Kryptonite so big before! If this place wasn't messing with my powers... I'd be dead already!"

"And you're allergic to the stuff, I take it?" Harry asked.

"It's a piece of her home system," Lantern answered. "Both she and Superman are vulnerable to it."

"Ah," Harry said in comprehension. "Green Achilles' heel. Got ya."

As Lantern gave Kara a look-over with his ring, a growl announced the arrival of a battered black panther. Said feline limped up to Travis before slowly reverting to the equally battered form of a woman.

"Shakira!" Travis shouted worriedly before embracing the woman.

She pulled back enough to look at the man in the eye. "Deemos is here," she said worriedly. "It's the end."

"Not yet, it isn't!" Harry disagreed. Seeing that Lantern finished his scan, Harry passed Kara to him before Disapparating. He reappeared upon the monastery's parapet to take in the situation.

Much to the wizard's surprise, Jennifer was already there, anxiously observing the situation.

Seeing the vast army besieging the village, Harry slipped into the detached mindset that the Shangri La monks had taught him. Feeling all nonessential thoughts fade into the background of his mind, Harry retrieved his Black family sword from its hiding place within his voluminous coat. Drawing the enchanted blade, Harry noticed the girl shiver as it began drawing on the nearby ambient energy. As the others poured out of the stone building's main gate, Harry caught a flurry of motion in the enemy's ranks. The rows of reptilian infantry and cavalry parted, allowing a sole rider to pass to the vanguard.

"Deemos!" the girl at his side growled.

"He's mine!" Harry said coldly. The blade began to emit a faint green glow, and the air surrounding the wizard began to chill. At that moment, the two forces engaged. As the humans stayed clustered near their palisades, the League members moved to the vanguard and began tackling the tougher opponents. Leaving the witch to target the mobile gun batteries, Harry Apparated to the ground and went to engage the evil wizard Deemos. In the small portion of his mind that was keeping a running tally, Harry noticed that this wizard seemed to resemble the post-resurrected Voldemort; they were even dressed similarly!

Finding his mark, Harry began to exchange both spells and sword blows with the pale-faced man. When possible, Harry would send a stray spell to assist his teammates. One such occasion was when he wandered near Green Lantern's fight with a white and black clad woman with some banshee-like power. The dark-skinned man used his ring to gag the woman, but his concentration was broken as he was knocked off-balance by an energy weapon discharge. Before the woman could use her power against him, Harry had conjured a new mouth restraint, this one charmed to be irremovable. A second spell stunned the woman, removing her from the fight.

With a salute to Lantern, Harry reengaged Deemos, who was slowly making his way towards the monastery. In the confusion, however, the magician's forces had catapulted some sort of mobile gun platform against the building's main wall. The weapon then blew a

hole into the unprotected interior large enough for Deemos and a couple of attendants to ride through easily.

Seeing as how apparition wasn't advisable in the unfamiliar structure, Harry sent a silent thanks to his friends at Black Ink for their modified motorcycle. Drawing on its psychic connection to a certain pooka, Harry called forth its resident spirit stallion whom HENCHGIRL had lovingly nicknamed 'Mortis'. Harry felt that calling a ghost horse 'Death' was a little redundant, but the animal seemed to like it and refused to answer to anything else.

"Mortis!" Harry spoke urgently. "I need you!" In answer to his plea, the translucent horse appeared before him. Quickly mounting the animal, Harry took off in pursuit. With Harry's mind filled with vital thoughts of stopping the other wizard's advance, the sword of Major Black took unilateral action and twisted into the familiar shape of a scythe. Not noticing the reconfiguration, Harry willed his coat back to the more encompassing robe before activating its invisibility function, a tactic that Mortis mimicked before he followed the other equines into the dark building.

Stargirl, having dispatched the remaining airborne threats, also saw the wizard's blatant entrance into the underground passageway. Much to her shock, she also saw the mysterious Mr. Black – who she had written off as inconsequential – seemingly morph from able-bodied swordsman to her mental picture of the Angel of Death, the Grim Reaper himself, and charge after the enemy on a pale horse.

Shaking off her shock, the girl flew the distance to the main gate and headed in the direction of the subterranean vault in hopes of cutting off the reptilian magician. Her plan was halfway successful. She actually managed to arrive at the same time as the opposing wizard. Unfortunately for her, Harry was nowhere in sight.

Deciding against waiting for backup, the girl disposed of the two flunkies before attacking Deemos himself. "You need a new plan!" she taunted as she pressed her opponent against the wooden doors of the vault itself.

"My magic is strongest, girl!" the wizard boasted before blasting Stargirl to her knees.

Regaining her footing, however, Courtney targeted the technological armbands the wizard was using against her and destroyed them. "Your breath is strongest, dude! That's about it!" Regrettably, she failed to remain mindful of her surroundings and the wizard's supplier of modern weaponry snuck up on her. The cyborg Metallo grabbed her staff in both hands and pulled back, strangling the girl between her own weapon and his metal skeleton.

"My, what a pretty girl!" Deemos mocked. "But then, they're always pretty when I begin..."

"Deemos!" Travis Morgan challenged as he brandished his sword. "You and me, pal!"

Deemos smiled wickedly. "Morgan!" he greeted. "I was hoping to kill you today." The two rulers faced off, rapidly chasing each other around the chamber and out a side passage.

In the meantime, Stargirl was fighting to free herself from Metallo's grasp. While she put forth a valiant effort, his mechanical strength was too much for her and he sent her careening into a block wall and, ultimately, unconsciousness. Smiling darkly in triumph, Metallo threw the girl's staff away contemptuously before casually making his way towards the Kryptonite's resting place.

Just before he could open it, however, another arrival made her presence known. Kara, having followed Courtney's path on foot, stood boldly in the doorway to the atrium as she announced, "Touch it and you're tinfoil!"

Metallo grinned before opening a compartment in his chest, revealing a glowing jade stone within his torso. Stalking towards the girl, the villain boasted, "At this distance, my Kryptonite power cell would bring your cousin to his knees!"

"I'm immune to Kryptonite, Metalmouth!" the blonde lied. "Give up!"

In response, the cyborg shot an energy beam from his power cell, causing Kara to duck and roll. However, she neatly shot back to her feet and brandished Stargirl's staff. Sensing weakness, Metallo smugly demanded, "If you're immune, love, then why do you need that staff?"

Receiving no answer, the cyborg charged. Swinging down with all her remaining strength, Kara managed to embed the golden staff in the robot's shoulder. However, the combined proximities of the jade power cell and the large meteorite deposit were taking their toll on the girl's health; her frenzied effort sent her to her knees.

Harry rode in on this scene. Quickly seeing the poor condition of his two teammates, he growled in fury and dismounted. Immediately noting the cyborg's glowing chest cavity and its effect on Kara, Harry ground out, "They shall not die this day!" Rapidly summoning the girls, Harry laid them across Mortis's strong back and ordered the horse to take them to safety.

Turning his attention to the sole remaining occupant, Harry's mood became – if possible – even grimmer. In the few moments' break, Metallo had recovered from Kara's attack enough to jettison the mangled arm and face off against this newest threat.

"And who the hell are you?" he demanded.

Harry grinned maliciously and John Corben, Metallo's remaining human side, inexplicably felt fear for the first time in a long while.

"I'm a messenger," Harry bit out frigidly as he slowly advanced on the damaged robot. Brandishing his scythe, the wizard added, "and I'm here to tell you that your time is over."

Lunging forward, Harry swung the implement of death and noted with satisfaction as his opponent's other arm was severed. Another completed swipe of the blade and the two remaining appendages joined the arms on the floor. Straddling the incumbent trunk, Harry reached down and wrapped his hand around the chunk of Kryptonite. He felt a tingle quickly spread up his arm and throughout his body. As quick as it appeared, however, the sensation vanished and Harry easily pulled the stone from its mooring. Holding the polished meteorite in front of the still-active torso, Harry made a fist and destroyed the offending article. Walking over his fallen foe, Harry pointed his scythe at the vault itself and quickly warded it against entry.

Satisfied that this portion of the fight was resolved, Harry briskly strode past the demolished villain towards the sound of a scuffle, grabbing Stargirl's staff as he passed. He located the conflict a few

moments later on the spiraled steps ascending to the surface. The 'barbarian' Morgan and the wizard Deemos were clashing swords at a furious pace as the two combatants gradually ascended the steps.

As Harry made his way to them, the wizard successfully disarmed Morgan with a feint and sent the man to his knees in a one-two combination. As the evil magician raised his sword in both hands to deliver the final stroke, Harry Apparated to the space between the two and caught the downward stroke on his scythe.

"Didn't anyone ever tell you it's rude to just walk off from a fight?" Harry demanded. "I'm not done with you yet."

"You are proving quite the nuisance!" Deemos admitted. "Perhaps you'll tell me your name before I kill you!" He pulled his sword back before launching a two-handed offense, which Harry had no problems deflecting with the twin poles he held.

"It's Mr. Black," Harry answered the man levelly, "and I doubt you could kill me in any event." As his opponent launched another powerful overhead strike, Harry swung his own weapon, catching the man in both forearms with the wickedly sharp blade.

Studiously avoiding the yells of pain from the cowering and amputated sorcerer, Harry pointed both staff and scythe at the other man's throat and demanded, "Do you yield?" As Harry took a step forward, his foe began backpedaling in a panic. Before Harry could react, the man had backed right off the landing, sending his screaming body to its demise against the unforgiving rock floor stories below.

Leaning over the edge, Harry gave a whistle. "Rough first step," he summarized to himself before offering Morgan a hand up.

"You did it!" he exclaimed with relief. "You destroyed Deemos!"

"We're not quite done yet," Harry disagreed. Placing a hand on the man's bare shoulder, he Apparated the pair of them back outside. Striding towards one of the remaining pockets of resistance, Harry missed the man's incredulous, fearful, and finally awed look as the 'barbarian' finally noticed Harry's grim appearance.

With his assistance, the humans defeated the remaining hostile forces and forced them to surrender. As the villagers cheered, the two older league members flew to Harry's location.

"You did good, Black," Lantern praised. Looking around, he asked, "Where's Kara?"

"And Courtney," the Mecha added.

"Both are safe," Harry assured them. Raising his right thumb and index finger to his mouth, Harry whistled shrilly and was answered almost immediately by a loud whinny. Moments later, the three men spotted a transparent horse stride down out of the sky bearing his two female passengers, both of whom appeared to be regaining consciousness.

"What in blazes is that?" Lantern demanded.

"That would be my... friend," Harry answered. "His name is Mortis."

"Mortis?" the other man echoed, recalling the word from his Latin studies years prior. "Your horse is named 'Death'?"

Harry just looked away and replied, "If it's all the same to you, I'd prefer to not discuss it."

"Fair enough," he allowed, although his mind continued to pore over several new pieces of information. Chief among them was that this 'Mr. Black' had a ghost horse named Death, was wearing a concealing black cloak, and carried a gleaming scythe. He was coming to only one conclusion, and the experienced Lantern guardian was not sure that he liked it.

As the pooka landed, Harry stowed his scythe away before helping the two girls back onto their feet and returning Courtney's staff.

Taking advantage of Harry's stability, Kara held onto his arm as the other girl found similar support with her father. "Wait a minute!" Kara suddenly blurted. "Where's Metallo?"

"Metallo?" Lantern and S.T.R.I.P.E. echoed.

"That robot chap?" Harry confirmed. At the girl's nod, he announced, "Dismantled."

"And Deemos?" Courtney inquired.

"Flattened," Harry said with a shrug. "Very sad," he added insincerely.

"Well, where's Silver Banshee?" Green Lantern finally asked.

At finding her unaccounted for, Pat began scanning the surrounding area. "There!" he announced, pointing a good distance away.

Harry could just barely see the monochromatic woman struggling to remove her gag as she slowly retreated into the distance. Shaking his head, Harry jerked his head in the woman's direction and the patiently waiting spirit horse leaped into motion. Within the span of a couple of seconds, the translucent animal had seized the woman by the simple expedient of biting down on her belt. Hoisting the strangely dressed female into the air, Mortis the Pooka turned around and lazily trotted back to the waiting group, coming to a halt in front of Harry.

"Good boy!" Harry praised the animal as it spat the woman onto the ground. Stroking the horse's snout, Harry looked down at their latest captive whose eyes never wavered from the creature who had... detained her.

The wizard in question shook a finger at her. "I don't believe that you have permission to leave," he pointed out before stunning her again. "Unconscious," he reported – unnecessarily – to GL. Mortis whinnied in agreement and, if Harry wasn't much mistaken, snickered. Deciding not to pursue the topic, Harry brushed off his robes before willing them back into his former attire.

Looking around, Harry took in the mostly superficial damage, as well as the losses in personnel. "Well, did we miss anybody?" Harry asked lightly.

"No, I think we're good," Travis replied as he caught up to the group.

"Nice party," Harry congratulated.

The white-haired man looked at Harry warily. "I'm glad you could make it."

"Hold the phone!" Lantern held a hand up. "Where's Corbin?" At Harry's raised eyebrow, he expounded, "Metallo?"

"Oh, right," Harry acknowledged with a snap of his fingers. "I left him down in the basement."

"We'd better hurry," he said to the group, "or he might escape."

Harry chuckled darkly. "Oh, I wouldn't worry too much about that..." he sing-songed.

"Oh, my...!" the ex-Marine breathed when the group returned to the underground temple. "What happened to him?"

Apparently, the cyborg had enough auxiliary power to remain conscious. Lantern's comment drew the... man's attention, causing the metallic head to focus on the new arrivals. The robot's eyes widened noticeably as they fell on Harry and his accompanying stallion, and he began stammering. "The Angel of Death! Keep away from me!"

Harry's reply consisted of staring at the ceiling and whistling.

"Right..." Lantern concluded sarcastically. "John Corbin, alias Metallo. Fancy meeting you here at the center of the Earth, muleing Kryptonite with Silver Banshee. Tell me," he ordered, "why do you want so much? There's enough Kryptonite in that tabernacle to satisfy a hundred Superman haters!"

"There's a scary thought," Kara quipped dully as Courtney wrapped her injured arm.

"You won't get anything out of me!" Metallo resisted.

Green Lantern smiled. "Maybe you'd prefer to talk to him?" he asked while pointing over his shoulder at Harry.

Holding his arms out with palms up, Harry conjured a fireball above one upturned hand and used Oyuki's gift to summon a miniature ice storm above the other. Grinning dangerously, Harry mused, "You

know? I always wondered what happened when you rapidly cooled superheated metal..."

"Alright!" the cyborg submitted. "I joined forces with-" The rest of the android's information was cut off as an electrical discharge erupted from his head, effectively destroying any information he might have had.

"Whoa, Nelly!" S.T.R.I.P.E. shouted as Metallo's pain-filled scream suddenly died out.

"Hey!" Harry pointed to the steaming mechanical corpse. "You're all my witnesses; I had nothing to do with that!"

Lantern looked at the scattered robotic limbs suggestively but withheld comment. "This isn't Silver Banshee's work. Somebody else didn't want Metallo to give them up."

"You'll take that thing with you?" Morgan asked.

"Definitely," S.T.R.I.P.E. replied, "and the great stone, too. GL'll whip it into the sun."

"Wait!" Kara interjected. "This is the one place where Kryptonite can do some good!"

"That's a fact," Morgan agreed.

Stewart looked contemplative. "We don't want any of his friends coming back after it," he finally stated, "so the only way I'll let the stone stay here is if we seal the portal to Scarteras permanently."

Harry suddenly latched onto an idea. "Would you settle for no one living being able to locate the portal?" the wizard asked.

"What are you saying?" the Green Lantern demanded.

"I can place a secrecy ward over the whole area," Harry informed them. "Even if every last lowlife on this planet was standing at the rim, they wouldn't see a thing. Only the secret keeper can divulge the information, so your little banshee couldn't guide someone here even if she tried."

Harry smiled. "And I can be awfully untalkative when I set my mind to it."

"Fine by me," Morgan seconded the idea. "I've got everything I need right here," he confessed when his wife and daughter descended the steps to stand behind him.

"Magic can really do such things?" Jennifer asked earnestly.

Harry chuckled. "Oh, magic can do a lot more than just that," Harry told her. "It can do many wonderful things," he mentioned while recalling memories of Hogwarts. "Its only real limits are those that you yourself grant it."

"I wish I could go with you and learn these things," she confessed, "but with all of the rebuilding... I am needed here."

He looked thoughtful for a moment before reaching into his pants' pocket and withdrawing his shrunken trunk. Returning it to its former size, Harry rifled through it until he found his objective and palmed it. Pocketing the trunk, Harry tossed an extra Zippo to the girl.

Turning it over in confusion, the young witch asked, "What is this?"

"If you need to reach me, just spin that wheel with your thumb and call my name," Harry instructed. "It's a lot easier than summoning an airplane down a subterranean tunnel," he added with a stern glance.

As GL used his ring to gather Metallo's remains, Harry helped Kara to stand and then began leading Mortis back to the surface.

"Wait!" the female mage called again. "I don't know your name. Who are you?"

"It's 'Black'!" Harry called over his shoulder as he departed. "Just call me 'Mr. Black'!"

Reaching ground level, Harry jumped on Mortis's back. "Would ye be needing a ride, Milady?"

Kara rolled her eyes. "You're crazy, you know that?" she asked rhetorically as she took his hand and swung up on the horse behind him.

"Certifiable," Harry answered with a straight face. "Come on, Mortis! We've got a ward to put up." As the transparent horse began ascending a trail of nothingness, Harry began singing quite audibly, "A warding we will go! A warding we will go! Hi ho, the dairy-oh! A warding we will go!" The last thing any of the people on the ground heard was a male voice asking, "What the bloody hell is a 'dairy-oh', anyway?"

Travis Morgan and his family were following the wizard's path with confusion evident on their faces. "Who is he?" Travis demanded. "Because I know who he reminds me of, and I also know that that's impossible."

"I honestly don't know," Lantern admitted. "I've got two theories; one of them's an immortal – and probably insane – sorcerer. You really don't want to hear the other one."

The Mecha was using its own sensors to probe the mysterious ally. Hearing John's and Travis's discussion, Pat Dugan found himself in full agreement.

"Revelations 6," the S.T.R.I.P.E. unit vocalized softly. "'And behold, a pale horse, and he who sat on it was Death, and Hell followed with him. Authority over one fourth of the earth, to kill with the sword, with famine, with death, and by the wild animals of the earth was given to him.'"

Jennifer, having grown up away from the rest of the world, was unable to follow this conversation. "What are you talking about?" she asked. "He seemed alright to me, if just a little... unbalanced."

Travis put a hand on his daughter's shoulder. "Princess," he said seriously, "you went a little overboard when you were summoning help. Your spell targeted the Grim Reaper himself!"

That term, she did know. Her eyes instinctively sought the offhanded gift that the stranger bestowed upon her before departing, before seeking his location out of the late afternoon sky.

Driving home the importance of the matter, her father added, "Please be more careful next time. Of the many people you

shouldn't tick off in life, the Guardian of the Dead is pretty high up on the list."

Once the five leaguers and their... cargo reached the surface, Harry set to work on warding the portal. Thankful that his ward book had included a detailed account of the Fidelius charm, the wizard was easily able to both seal and hide the gaping entrance – and by association, the subterranean civilization. Harry added the final changes and felt the ward begin functioning.

"Done!" he announced.

"Done with what?" Lantern asked, breaking off his conversation with the others. "Hey, wasn't there a... thing here?"

"Come again?" Harry asked smugly.

"The... place. I mean, we just went through the... thingy!" he attempted to clarify.

"And where is this 'thingy'?" Harry pressed intently.

His mouth worked for a few moments without anything coming out. When that failed, he questioned the rest of the team – without success. "You know where it is!" the ex-Marine finally burst out.

"Indeed I do!" the wizard admitted. Climbing back on Mortis, he added, "And now, I'm the only one who does."

"How you feeling?" Courtney asked the other blonde-haired woman as they prepared to depart. "Need a lift?"

Kara smiled before launching herself into the air. "Nah, I'm good!"

Harry nudged his ride and joined the two girls in the air.

"You know, it's gonna take you forever to ride that thing back to the Metro Tower," Courtney pointed out helpfully.

Harry grinned sharply. "Wanna bet?" he asked as the Pooka twisted beneath him to become a stylish motorbike. Revving the throttle, he challenged the two girls. "Catch me if you can!" and gunned the machine, shooting forward at an insane speed.

The two teenaged superheroines looked at one another before taking off after the cackling wizard as fast as they could.

"Courtney!" Pat shouted. "You slow your butt down!"

"Ugh!" Stargirl grunted. "My dad."

"I know," Kara commiserated. "Superman tried to keep me on the farm; made me hide there for three years."

"Big deal!" Courtney countered. "I've still got a curfew. Enough cosmic energy to trash a city and I can't stay out past ten!"

Kara wasn't swayed. "Three years! On a farm! In Kansas!"

Traveling behind the trio at a more casual pace, John was strategizing. "We'll have J'onn probe Banshee's and what's left of Metallo's mind. I want to know what he was going to say."

"Something's going on, ain't it?" S.T.R.I.P.E. realized.

The unspoken response unsettled both men, and the rest of the trip was spent in contemplative silence.

After the group arrived back at their on-planet headquarters, Lantern excused the rest of the team for the rest of their shift. Kara had offered to show Harry the exciting world of cinema on the way back, and the wizard took her up on the offer. Overhearing the exchange during the flight, Courtney essentially invited herself along, so the three younger members took the unexpected break to review the multimedia wonders of Kansas City.

As the mecha S.T.R.I.P.E. was clanking his way from the room, he paused at a call from Lantern. "Hey, Pat?"

Having an idea of what this was about, Pat Dugan slid the door closed once more. "Yes, John?"

"The inner council is expecting a report on our new recruit's abilities. Would you provide whatever your suit recorded of the mission?"

Shifting his helmet to his other hand, he looked at the African-American disbelievingly. "What exactly is there to report?" he demanded. "We just spent the last six hours in the company of the incarnation of Death itself who, when he's not behaving like a hyperactive five-year-old, smites everyone that stands against him like an Old Testament God and casually throws around more power than any team of Leaguers could ever hope to match. There's not a whole lot a guy like me can add to a summary like that, my friend."

"Still, I'm sure that the others would appreciate reviewing whatever recordings you might have," John Stewart pressed.

"Oh, all right," the other man conceded. "I assume that you mean for us to go now?"

The Green Lantern nodded. "It's probably for the best. Most of them should be up on the Watchtower anyway." At the other man's nod of approval, John activated his communicator to dispatch and the two were teleported aboard the space station. Meeting up with the impassive J'onn, John explained the situation and arranged for a substitution with Mr. Terrific. The trio proceeded to the secure conference room, where the remainder of the inner council was amassed.

"John," Clark said in greeting. "We expected you some time ago. Was the situation in Japan direr than we were led to believe?"

The Lantern shook his head. "No, that situation was resolved rather quickly, what with Pat, Courtney, Kara, and Black's help. We did run into another complication on the return trip, however."

"And that involves Dugan's presence?" Batman deduced from his high-backed chair.

"Yes," John confirmed. He then gave his teammates a quick rundown of their second mission, after which Pat displayed his suit's recording of the entire incident on the room's video monitor.

The clip concluded with the group flying off from the arctic, leaving the audience dumbfounded.

"That's... intense," Flash understated.

"It proves nothing," Batman barked. "He could have used magic-" he seemed to chew on the term uncomfortably "-to perform the little illusions he needed to pull something like that off."

"It wasn't just a costume change, Batman," John disagreed. "I saw the plants wither and die as he walked by and the animals were skittish when he drew near."

"Not to mention," Pat added, "that the immediate vicinity's average temperature dropped at least twenty degrees while the scythe was engaged. Once he... reverted, for lack of a better term, the ambient energy seemed to recover."

"Plus the fact that he has a ghost horse that can become solid if it chooses, or is ordered," John mentioned. "Creating a creature such as that goes beyond any magic tricks I've seen."

"It could still be a deception," the Dark Knight retained.

"To what purpose?" Diana asked. "It seemed that he was more interested in not broadcasting his... lapse."

When no answer was forthcoming, Diana asked Pat if he had anything else to add. When he indicated that he did not, Superman thanked him for his time and the mecha left the room, leaving the original seven.

Turning to her Martian friend, the Amazon asked, "You talked with him last night, J'onn. Do you have any insights to offer?"

"I was able to glean very little in the way of information," he admitted. "Mr. Black's mental shields are formidable and he enforces them actively. In my opinion, any attempts to invade his mind by force will be immediately detected, sparking retaliation."

"So you weren't able to pick up anything?" Shayera asked.

"I can tell you one thing I sensed," he added. At everyone's interested expression – well, except for Batman, who appeared as stoic as ever –, he admitted, "He's not human, or at least not entirely human. I have not encountered his like before, of that I am certain."

Putting aside his own private desire to... discuss a few matters of etiquette with the mysterious man, Superman asked, "So, how do we approach this situation?"

"Personally, I recommend a severe reprimand, if not an even more serious punishment," Batman submitted.

"With what cause?" Diana exclaimed shocked.

The cowed man looked even more foreboding than usual. "The League does not propound the use of lethal force. We have evidence that Black intentionally allowed this 'Deemos' to fall to his own death – assuming that Deemos fell without outside assistance –, and virtually admitted to dismembering Metallo, contributing to a second fatality."

"Such is battle," Diana contradicted. "Sometimes, a warrior has no choice but to use deadly force to serve the greater good – to preserve life. From what I saw, he showed mercy where it could be afforded. By all accounts, these people had no one to match Deemo's power. If Black had merely captured him and turned him over to their custody, he would have most likely escaped and destroyed them. Besides, their law permits the use of lethal force, so he technically didn't do anything wrong. And let's not forget that if Mr. Black truly is who we believe him to be, he was on his best behavior the entire time. I know of many old tales prevalent even in Man's world that depict him with a much worse disposition."

"Not all of us are as eager to discard civilized behavior, Princess," he chided sharply.

"We Martians once felt the same way," J'onn confided, "and it ultimately destroyed us. Are our actions when the far outsiders threatened Earth very different from these? Our assault resulted in an entire civilization's demise. I, for one, feel no guilt at the destruction of such volatile creatures. I am, however, very interested in what prompted a visit from Death's avatar since we know that his mission is not to eliminate any of us."

Flash gave voice to the question that several of the others had on their minds. "Why'd you think that?"

J'onn regarded the scarlet speedster calmly for a few moments before stating decisively, "We are still alive."

"He has a point," Shayera agreed. "So if it's not us, then who did he come for?"

"I cannot believe that you are giving credence to such foolishness!" Batman rebuked the six of them. "The whole notion is absurd! The Grim Reaper is just a superstition to amuse lesser minds!"

"Maybe," Clark weighed in, "but then again, you would have said the same thing a few years ago about extraterrestrials, amazons, teleportation, and alternate realities."

The Caped Crusader dipped his head in acknowledgement of the fact but refrained from speaking.

"You must also take into account your species' past history," J'onn mentioned. "The reality of death has had a substantial influence on the human psyche and the development of your civilization as a whole. The personification of Death as a living, sentient entity is a concept that has existed in all known terrestrial societies since the beginnings of your recorded history."

"True," Bruce allowed, "but this Mr. Black is no animated skeleton. Additionally, his weapon took the neutral form of a sword, not a scythe."

Diana made a small noise in her throat to get everyone's attention. "Actually, that particular myth is almost exclusive to the United States. In Greek culture, we call him Thanatos, the son of Lady Nyx – Night - and twin of Hypnos - Sleep. In most of our accounts, Thanatos was seen as a very powerful figure armed with a sword and having a shaggy beard and a fierce face." The Amazon shrugged. "Maybe he shaved sometime over the centuries, but everything else seems to fit."

"And did this 'Thanatos' have any weaknesses that we can exploit?" Batman asked intently.

She hesitated. "Well, supposedly Thanatos could sometimes be outsmarted; Sisyphus is reported as doing so twice. When it was time for Sisyphus to die, he succeeded in chaining Thanatos up with

his own shackles. While Thanatos was chained, no mortals could die, but eventually Ares released Thanatos and handed Sisyphus over to him. The second time, Sisyphus tricked Thanatos by convincing Zeus to allow him to return to his wife."

Batman looked contemplative. "Are there any other such cases?"

"No, beyond those two occasions, I know of no mortal who ever stood against him and won," Diana said resolutely.

When the masked Bruce failed to make a further objection, Clark returned his attention to the main purpose of their discussion. "So, until we have evidence to the contrary, we must assume that we're playing host to Death personified. With that in mind, how do we proceed?"

"Very... very... carefully," John Stewart said in all seriousness. "If I remember my Sunday school lessons right, this is the guy that took out 185,000 Assyrian soldiers in one pass when they stood against the Israelites."

"Yeah, I remember that, too," Flash seconded. "Not to mention when he killed the firstborn son of every Egyptian family in the entire country in a single night!" The hyperactive man thought for a moment longer before asking, "hey, isn't he the one from Revelations who's gonna kill off a quarter of the planet in one go?"

"That's the way I remember it," Lantern confirmed. Looking at Clark, he confided, "I recommend that, unless we have to intervene, we leave him alone. At least he doesn't seem to mind answering questions, so we can hopefully learn something more concrete about why he is here. He's actually a lot more personable than I would have thought... except when he's got that scythe out."

"Speaking of being personable, where did he get off to? Did he return to the Watchtower with you and Pat?" Clark asked.

The ex-Marine shook his head. "Kara invited him along for a few movies, and Courtney tagged along."

The Man of Steel blinked before appeared slightly sick. "You let Kara... my baby cousin... go on a movie date with the Angel of

Death?" he finished with a nervous shout. "And Pat's step-daughter as well?"

"It's not like I could do a whole lot to stop him," John mentioned as he tapped his power ring. "This thing has its limits, you know." Seeing that his friend was distinctly unrelieved, he added, "Hey, he went to a great deal of trouble to save the pair of them earlier this evening. I don't think he has any plans of harming them."

John thought over what he had just said. "In fact, the only real interest he seemed to have in either of them was getting tips on tourist traps." The League was silent for a few moments as everyone digested his last statement.

Batman summarized Lantern's report in his typical laconic manner a few moments later.

"So, you are telling us that Death is taking a vacation?"

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Chapter 4: It's Lonely at the Top... But It's Got a Swell View by Overkill

Next Chapter

Disclaimer: This is a cross between JLA (Season 5) and Rorschach's Blot's Make A Wish Story. Harry Potter is owned by JK Rowling and various publishers. Henchgirl, The Professor, and other such objects are Rorschach's creation. DC Comics own the Justice League and associated characters/plot devices. The lack of plot, however, can be attributed to me.

It's Lonely at the Top... But It's Got a Swell View

Having left the council meeting unsatisfied, Batman returned to his subterranean base of operations. Still occupied with the most recent exploits of the anomaly Mr. Black, the Caped Crusader sent his apprentices out to patrol Gotham in his stead while the head Bat ensconced himself in front of the giant Bat computer. While his associates in the League may accept this 'Mr. Black' as the living avatar of Death without any firm data to corroborate their assumption, the World's Greatest Detective required more proof.

Which explained why he was tracking both Kara's and Courtney's comm. signal. Apparently, someone failed to provide Black with a communications device, forcing Batman to follow his behavior via the girls' devices and whatever security systems he managed to hack. Currently, he was observing his three objectives seated close together in a dark auditorium as they viewed yet another showing of the Star Wars saga.

"Ah, motion picture piracy," a cultured British voice interrupted his ongoing analysis. "It seems to be the craze nowadays. I never thought that the Batman would subscribe to such behavior when the films are readily available on the open market. Then again, I'm not the World's Greatest Detective..."

"Very funny," the Caped Crusader replied.

"So, what possible reason would you have for spying on young people while they enjoy one another's company?" the ex-thespian inquired. "Other than Master Tim, of course. Or Miss Barbara, or Master Dick, or..."

"Thank you, Alfred," Bruce answered levelly. "However, this is League business. I am observing a potentially dangerous individual - a being who might pose more of a threat than any meta-human."

"Ah, yes," the elderly butler agreed sardonically, "the cad is cuddling with two single women at the same time; simply monstrous. How marvelous that you will now be able to bring this fiend to justice!"

Choosing to ignore his adoptive father's harassment, Bruce leaned back in his chair and rested his chin upon his joined hands. "What would you say if I told you the League's convinced that this 'Mr. Black' is, in fact, the embodiment of Death?"

"Had it come from any other source, I believe that they would need immediate psychiatric treatment. Seeing as how we are discussing the Justice League, however, I would tentatively confirm it as fact," the British man confided.

"You don't find the entire concept overly fanciful?" the other man asked disbelievingly.

Alfred smiled slightly. "Master Bruce, in the past few years, you and your teammates have faced alien invasions, rampaging gods, alternate universes, alien civilizations, and genetically enhanced clones. All things considered, the notion that the Grim Reaper would decide to pay you people a visit seems entirely rational."

"Perhaps..." Bruce allowed, "But it does not follow that he should be inducted into the League without any sort of evaluation whatsoever, regardless of who he is."

"Then evaluate him yourself, Master Bruce," Alfred concluded logically. "If memory serves, did you not have a similar problem with Miss Helena when Huntress joined the League?"

Finished with his task in the cave, Alfred began ascending the many steps leading up to the mansion as he recommended, "Might I advise you to invite this 'Mr. Black' along on your next mission and judge his suitability for yourself?"

Contemplating the situation for a few moments, he shuffled the duty roster for the next rotation so that Clark, Diana and he were all

present on the Watchtower simultaneously. Perhaps between the three of them, they could resolve just whom they were dealing with.

It was time to see just who Mr. Black really is.

After their show was over, Kara and Courtney dragged Harry around the big city, sampling its many different amusements. Much to Harry's dismay, this seemed to include marathon shopping. Apparently, a shopping partner that can shrink a mountain of bags down to fit in a single pocket is a valuable commodity - seeing as how the two blonde-haired women kept fighting over his services all night.

It was with great relief on Harry's part when their escapade finally ended and the three junior Leaguers returned to the Watchtower for the evening. He received word that Superman had wanted to speak with him from numerous League members, but the wizard discovered that the Man of Steel had departed their solar system on an emergency call along with Green Lantern. Parting ways, Harry returned to his dormitory aboard the space station where the earlier ordeal sent him swiftly asleep.

Waking several hours later, Harry repeated the previous morning's routine. The only deviations were that Kara was visiting her family, the Green Lantern didn't look him up while he was eating, and – most significantly – the coffee was back. Harry soon discovered that there was something wrong with this 'decaf' brew, however. It both looked and smelled like coffee, but it tasted nothing like the delicious concoction he had discovered only two days prior.

With no plans of how to spend his day, Harry meandered around the space station and finished exploring the place. Eventually, he found his way back to the operations' room replete with teleporters, their Martian supervisor, and two new faces – the oddly dressed 'Mr. Terrific' and the humorous Robin hood knock-off 'Green Arrow'.

After the introductions – and many bad jokes regarding green tights - were made, Harry decided to just watch the monitors and familiarize himself with the other members of this group and their abilities. However, the wizard redirected his attention to the platform's entrance a few minutes later due to a wolf whistle courtesy of the jade archer.

"Looking good, Diana!" Green Arrow praised. "Big date?"

"No such luck, Ollie," Wonder Woman answered as she entered wearing a stylish business suit. "I'm representing Themyscira at the global warming conference."

In reply, he gave the 'thumbs up' sign. "Way to go, man. Save the planet."

"More like save my relationship with my mother," she disagreed.

Oliver Queen shrugged. "Hey, at least you're speaking again," he pointed out unnecessarily.

"It's the first thing she's asked me to do since we mended fences," Diana explained before frowning. "I'd rather take another day trip to Tartarus."

"I think you'll make a great diplomat," the archer replied, patting her on the shoulder. He thought for a moment before adding helpfully, "Leave your sword."

"I'm serious," she said while giving the man a half-hearted glare. "I don't want to go by myself. J'onn, how about you come along and keep me company?"

"The Justice League currently has twenty three active missions in progress," the Martian Manhunter answered flatly without turning around. "Only I can properly deploy what remains of our resources."

"Oh, please!" Diana protested. "Mr. Terrific can fill in. He's smart enough to do monitor duty and the Sunday crossword at the same time!"

"Go ahead, J'onn," the addressed superhero confirmed. "I'm already done with the crossword."

"You did it in ink again, didn't you?" the Green Arrow muttered disgustedly.

The other hero just shrugged.

J'onn remained unconvinced. "Mr. Terrific is more than capable, but I insist that I remain where I am needed," he said tonelessly.

"Turn around and talk to me," Diana ordered gently. When he complied, she continued, "You've been cooped up like a hermit in the Watchtower for almost two years now."

He started to respond. "I can better serve the League--"

"We're not even going to have that argument again!" she interrupted him. "You're a super strong, nearly invulnerable, telepathic shapeshifter. The reason you're not on the ground protecting people is because you don't want to be." A sudden thought occurred to her. "You don't actually like humanity all that much, do you?" the Amazon realized.

The chastised Martian turned back around. "I don't... dislike them," he evaded.

"You're not the only newcomer to this world around here," Diana pressed. "People have strange ways and take a lot of getting used to, but it's worth the effort! They're worth it!"

"She's got your number, J'onn," Ollie jumped in. "You need to mingle. Maybe take a meal in the commissary every once in a while."

"My Martian physiology does not require as many meals as a human," he answered flatly.

"You know what he means," Diana sighed. "You must be terribly lonely." She looked at her watch. "I've got to go, but we're not done talking about this!"

As she turned around and started to walk off, Harry called out and stopped her. "Hey, Diana, if you really don't want to go to this shindig alone, I can go with you," the wizard said.

"Thanks anyway, Mr. Black, but it's a formal event and I don't have time for you to--" she trailed off as Harry's casual wardrobe morphed into a complete suit with a blue blazer much like her own, black pants, and a white shirt – "change clothes," she finished softly.

"So, do I pass muster?" Harry asked as he spun around on his heel.

"You'll do," she said dryly. "You know, you don't have to go if you don't want."

Harry shrugged. "I owe you a consort gig, anyhow," he said easily. "So," he gestured towards the door to the teleporter pads, "shall we go?"

Diana rolled her eyes at the apparently bipolar individual. She still could not match the swift and decisive warrior she saw via S.T.R.I.P.E.'s recording yesterday with this playful, easygoing, and probably insane man standing before her. "Come on," she invited finally.

"Yeth, Mahster," Harry replied in a slurred voice as he took her proffered arm.

As the pair began descending the hallway, the other two league members could just barely hear their conversation.

"You haven't had any coffee yet, have you?" they heard Wonder Woman ask.

"Just decaf," the mysterious male answered disappointedly, "and not very much at that. It was awful!"

"Thank Hera!" Diana muttered under her breath before going silent once more.

"The proposed accords are far too drastic!" the Vice President of the United States protested. "With all due respect, Princess, we're talking about committing hundreds of millions of dollars and nobody has even proven the existence of global warming!"

"My mother's government fully supports the findings of her scientists," Diana replied, "and those of the vast majority of the scientists here in Man's world."

"My government does not accept those studies," the French ambassador disagreed.

"Then accept the evidence of your eyes!" Diana replied forcefully. "There's a Viking ship at the bottom of this mountain, hidden in ice

for 1100 years! If it weren't for global warming, then we wouldn't even know about it!"

"Yes," yet another stuffy aristocrat agreed sarcastically, "and it was clever P.R. of our host to hold the talks here, but it is not proof."

"You have to take this seriously!" Diana stressed. "Atlantis has already withdrawn from the world assembly over this. And they aren't the only country considering action."

"Are you suggesting that Themyscira might do the same?" the French woman inquired.

"If your pollution continues to affect my home, my mother is less likely to withdraw than she is to attempt a military solution," Diana said bluntly. The conversation halted as the assembled world leaders overheard the understated threat. "As a last resort, only, of course," she added belatedly.

"Madame Ambassador?" she heard a British voice call out. "Princess Diana?" Harry pushed through the crowd until he reached her side. "Telephone call for you, Madame," Harry said before balancing a wine distiller in one hand and offering her the other arm. "Right this way, Madame," he invited before leading her to a side door and out to the veranda. Once the two were outside, Harry turned the chilled container up and drained most of its contents.

"There was no phone call, was there?" Diana asked shrewdly.

"Sure there was!" Harry protested. "Reality called. It said that threats of a military invasion aren't exactly a helpful part of the peace process at a world assembly."

"I'm not much of a diplomat," Diana said resignedly.

"Don't sell yourself short," the veranda's other occupant said before turning around. "You're an international incident waiting to happen."

"Agent Faraday," Diana greeted the man. "What are you doing here?"

"I'm with the security detail on the Vice President; he's attending this conference, too," the secret service agent supplied. "Of course, you know that already. I saw you reading him the riot act earlier."

He started walking away before throwing over his shoulder. "By the way, if you threaten the V.P. again, my men are under orders to shoot you."

Diana let her sleeve fall back to reveal her armored bracelets, one of which she flicked meaningfully.

"I wouldn't recommend that, mate," Harry said sternly. "If your associate in there can't handle criticism, then all well and good. Pulling a heavy-handed stunt like what you just mentioned, however..." Harry trailed off. "Well, I can guarantee that things won't end well for you," he said flatly.

"And who are you?" Faraday demanded.

"You may call me Mr. Black. I'm Lady Diana's... bodyguard," Harry deliberated.

The white-haired man just mimicked firing a gun before heading back inside.

"You didn't need to do that," Diana said angrily. "I can take care of myself just fine!"

"I know you can," Harry said unconcernedly. "My point is that you shouldn't have to. I've had my fair share of idiot politicians in my time; threats of prosecution just for having a difference of opinion with the leader elect put me in a bad mood."

Diana nodded sharply before visibly calming. "Thank you for the exit, by the way," the Amazon finally offered.

"Any time," he waved off her unspoken apology as he leaned against the railing.

A few moments passed in silence as the two stared off at the icy landscape before the structure upon which they stood began shaking. Sensing that her help would be needed shortly, Diana

began spinning very quickly. When she came to rest, she was once more clad in her uniform.

"Impressive!" Harry congratulated as he willed his own clothing back into his own 'Battle gear'. With both Kara and Courtney on his case about it, Harry figured that he'd keep the 'Punisher' look going a while longer. When the 'in vogue' alternative was tights and wearing his underwear outside of his trousers, the wizard quickly agreed that the black shirt/pants/coat combo was more than acceptable.

"Let's go!" Diana ordered before jumping over the side rail and freefalling towards the bottom of the gorge. Shrugging to himself, Harry followed suit. Using their separate abilities, the two came to rest against the wooden work platform around the Viking skiff. The source of the disturbance was clear as four costumed villains were attacking the site's guards.

Harry quickly took in their opponents. The first man was in an enclosed suit and was using a backpack flamethrower to cut the boat loose from the frozen cliff. Out of the remaining three, one was a blue-tinted woman who appeared to have powers over ice, much like his own gifts he received from Oyuki. Another was a red-haired female giant, who was cheerfully kicking the personnel – and their equipment – far out into the ocean. The third fighter was presumed male; it was difficult to determine, as the figure was entirely encapsulated in a diamond-headed suit as he shot darts at their enemies.

"You have to stop!" one of the guards shouted. "If you pull that ship out, the whole mountain could fall down!"

"So?" the pyromaniac demanded.

"So," Diana butted into the conversation. "I'm not going to let you do it!" As the giant moved to engage the League representatives, Diana took flight with both fists outstretched. "Out of my way, jumbo!"

"Ow!" the woman protested. "That hurt!" In retaliation, the giant backhanded the floating Diana. The Amazon began flying backwards towards the sea but quickly regained her bearings.

As those two engaged, Harry began counteracting the ice wielder's efforts with a combination of flame charms and his own wintry

powers. After a brief grappling, Harry buried the woman under a giant slab of ice just as Diana knocked the giantess for a loop and landed. The pair was on the lookout for the unaccounted for villain when Harry caught a glimpse of the diamond-shaped head as the figure rose from behind a discarded crate and leveled some sort of weapon at Diana's unprotected back.

Harry shoved the woman out of the way, but a projectile had already been launched and caught him in the side of the neck. Harry staggered back as he suddenly felt a burning sensation overtake his body before his unique immune system began counteracting the toxin.

"It's a poisonous stinger," the man said helpfully as his female companions regained their footing. "It will kill you eventually... slowly... painfully. But today's your lucky day," the helmeted villain informed as he brandished both wrist-mounted dart guns. "I'm gonna put you out of your misery right now."

Harry felt Diana pull the stinger out of his flesh, and the world almost immediately jumped back into focus. Straightening his posture and drawing both wand and sword, Harry raised one eyebrow mockingly and said, "Fraid I'll have to pass on that, mate!"

Upon seeing their shock due to the 'victim' not writhing in agony, Harry laughed darkly and said, "You'll have to do better than that! I'm immune to your little toys!"

To make matters even worse for the lawbreaking team, Agent Faraday and his squad came flying in by way of jet packs with pistols blazing as they took potshots at the criminals.

"Are you all right?" Diana asked urgently at his side.

"Just peachy!" Harry growled. "Let's take these punks down!"

The airborne secret service agents tackled the villains, but their charge was slowly beaten back by a combined effort of Devil Ray, Killer Frost, and Giganta. As Faraday and Harry were attempting to hit the frosty woman with either spell or bullet, Diana was guarding their backs from Devil Ray, who was still firing poisoned darts at the group when possible.

"We should retreat!" Faraday yelled over his shoulder.

"I'm not backing down from a fight!" Diana protested immediately.

"Listen!" he barked. "Your friend's veins are full of poison! I don't know how he's still on his feet! It's only a matter of time before his system shuts down!"

Harry just snorted as he fired one of the Weasley twins' spells at the redheaded giant, finally penetrating her defenses by the simple expedient of tying her shoelaces together. As the extremely tall woman struck the ground with a resounding thud, Harry turned his head to the white-haired federal agent. "Oh, don't worry too much about me," Harry advised. "I'm a resilient little bugger. I wouldn't say no to some friendly faces right about now, though." He then blew out some of the frozen supports that the other female criminal was using to remain aloft.

"I guess calling for support isn't backing down," Diana conceded as she reached for her commlink.

"J'onn?" Diana spoke into the tiny device. "I've got a situation!"

"Watchtower sensors have picked up the tremors from your location," the Martian responded calmly. "I knew you were on the scene and assumed you could handle it."

"Well, I can't," she admitted. "We're outnumbered, and Mr. Black's been hit with an unknown compound, though he's still on his feet."

"We're still shorthanded," the League's telepath admitted. "I can spare Green Arrow, and... Mr. Terrific."

"Bring who you want, J'onn, but I need you!" she demanded before cutting the transmission. Agent Faraday had exhausted all of his ammunition and Harry was hard-pressed to keep the ice mage and the flying dart thrower both simultaneously in check.

As Giganta freed herself and rushed forward, her charge was stopped by a two-pronged attack. The first blow was a Conjunctivitis curse to her face, courtesy of Harry. The second attack took the form of an explosive arrow fired from the side of the ice cliff.

"What's wrong, Sweetheart?" they all heard the voice of Oliver Queen call out mockingly. "Break a nail?"

"Green Arrow?" the giantess said questioningly.

"That's right," he admitted as he drew another bolt from his quiver, "and I brought company."

At that moment, the Martian Manhunter made his own appearance, introducing his fist to Devil Ray's faceplate with extreme prejudice. With that source of trouble removed, Diana took flight and once more engaged Giganta. The archer chose Killer Frost as his own target and launched three explosive arrows at the woman. She noticed this attack, however, and diverted the bolts with a wave of ice. The wintry projectile then engulfed the archer himself, freezing him solid.

Harry rewarded this tactic by banishing the woman several feet away and immediately casting a flame charm to thaw his teammate. As the ice began to melt, the man finished freeing himself with – of all things – a circular saw blade at the tip of an arrow.

"And Canary said that a buzz saw arrow was self indulgent!" Ollie quipped.

"Right..." Harry said tentatively before bringing his full attention back to the fight. Seeing that both Diana and J'onn had broken off their own skirmishes, Harry and Oliver joined the pair.

"They have the opportunity to escape, and yet they remain fighting," J'onn observed. "What makes that ancient vessel so important?"

Diana looked thoughtful. "If I can get my lasso around one of them, I can make them tell!"

"Good idea, but save your strength," J'onn concluded. Using his telepathic gift, he entered Giganta's mind and got a summary of what they were planning before some unknown force interrupted the connection, sending both parties involved to their knees.

"J'onn! What happened? Are you okay?" Diana demanded worriedly as she helped her teammate back to his feet.

"I... didn't get it all, but we can't allow them to get that ship! I-" he answered firmly before the ground began shaking again, interrupting his reply. An unmarked submarine surfaced right next to the Viking ship with Devil Ray standing atop its control tower. The vessel launched two tether cables into the ice on either side of the smaller boat and succeeded in pulling the frozen skiff free.

As the worker predicted earlier, however, this started a chain reaction that was slowly but surely destroying the cliff and, by extension, the resort above. Diana and J'onn pulled Faraday and Oliver to the top of the cliff as Harry Apparated up to join them.

"I've got the sub!" Oliver called before firing a tethered arrow at the submarine's control tower and sliding down the decline.

"What he said," Harry seconded before Apparating onto the ship's surface and banishing the armed guards off the deck and into the icy water. Arrow soon joined him and Harry Apparated the pair up to the topside entry hatch.

As the blonde-haired archer dismissed the shock, Harry opened the portal and the pair dropped into the boat after sealing the entrance behind them. Remaining as silent as possible, they sneaked forward and dispatched any opposition with either stunning spells, gas arrows, or the highly effective 'beating the other guy over the head' approach. After finally reaching the control room, Harry happened to glance at the television monitors observing the submarine as Arrow severed the connection between the two skiffs.

"Diana's in trouble," Harry informed the other man, pointing to the camera featuring the Amazon princess grappling with Devil Ray. "Can you handle things here?"

Oliver made a show of looking at all of the sleeping guards. "Yeah, I'm good," he answered sardonically. Harry gave him a lackadaisical two-fingered salute before casting a bubblehead charm around himself and Apparating outside of the vessel to assist the Amazon.

Finding the heroine and villain quarreling with neither gaining the upper hand, Harry swam up behind the suited man as he was attempting to compress the woman's chest and exhaust her dwindling oxygen supply even faster.

"Here's a hint," Devil Ray gloated. "You want to hold your breath for as long as you can."

Seeing that they were not too far from the surface, Harry ripped the man's helmet off with a quick twist to reveal a surprised male of African descent. Before his opponent could gather his wits, the wizard disarmed the man of his wrist-mounted dart guns. Pointing a finger upwards, Harry glibly informed - through the transparent magical barrier over his head -, "the surface would be that way." Deprived of his former means of underwater breathing, Devil Ray took off swimming towards the light – and air.

Seeing Diana gesture from her mouth to the surface, Harry quickly cast the same bubblehead charm for her. "You can stop holding your breath now," Harry mentioned helpfully.

Tentatively doing so, Diana was surprised that this 'bubble' served the same function as both scuba gear and communication apparatus, but without any apparent means of doing so. "How did you...?" she trailed off.

"Mag-ic," Harry sing-songed. 'Really,' he wondered, 'how many times are we going to have this conversation?'

Pointing at the sinking Viking skiff/ice cube, Harry asked, "Shall we?" as he cast a levitation charm on the block, ceasing its descent.

"Sure," she replied easily before knifing through the water and coming up underneath their objective. With no discernable effort, she then began swimming upwards, pushing the item in front of her. Harry just shrugged and decided against his original plan of levitating the chunk of ice to the surface. After all, she was doing just fine and he had no real desire to damage her pride again so soon.

"Where's Green Arrow?" Diana asked as Harry swam up alongside her.

"Captain Nemo's minding the ship," the wizard replied while gesturing towards the now-motionless submarine. "We already took out its crew before I saw you and your little friend back here and decided to join the party. Weren't you and J'onn going to stop the whole cliff from collapsing?"

"J'onn's on it," Diana replied. "He was going to get Killer Frost to use her powers to stop it."

"I take it that 'Killer Frost' is the ice queen, then?" Harry inquired.

Diana nodded. "She can control ice in a wide variety of ways. Hopefully, she can stop several tons of it." The two finally broke the surface and Harry, catching sight of Devil Ray swimming furiously for the shore, sent a stunner after the man and stopped him instantly.

"Nice shot," Diana praised. "What did it do?"

Harry gave another mock salute. "Thanks. That was a stunner, by the way. He'll wake up without injury in a few hours." Harry looked towards the shore and squinted. "It appears that Frosty did her job," he pointed out.

Making a noise of agreement, Diana maneuvered the giant chunk of ice onto the remnants of the icy 'beach' at the foot of the cliff, where the two were soon joined by the other Leaguers, Faraday, and a few of his men. Apparently, Agent Faraday had three Seawolf-class submarines on standby, and they had boarded the villains' vessel, secured the prisoners, and returned Oliver to the surface. J'onn turned over his own captive to the authorities and, after a brief flight by Diana to fetch the sleeping Devil Ray, the defeated criminals were all incarcerated.

"You know, I still don't know what this was all about," Faraday commented.

"They think that the Viking prince's corpse will give them the secret of invulnerability," Oliver informed the federal agent.

"That was their plan," J'onn agreed, "or as much of it as I could learn before something shut down Giganta's mind. It seemed to be set by the same person guarding Silver Banshee's thoughts."

Diana looked confused. "Green Lantern said the same thing when he tried to question Metallo," she reminisced. "Of course, there were other... factors that might have contributed to his shutdown," she added with a meaningful glance at Harry.

The implicated wizard just looked off in a random direction while whistling in an overly innocent manner.

"So these guys were working with Metallo?" Faraday half-asked half-stated as he discretely kept one eye on Harry.

"And perhaps with others," J'onn agreed. Changing topics, he concluded, "We can't leave Prince John's body here. Whoever else is involved will just try again."

"The legend of the Viking prince is known even to my people," Diana informed them. "If this is really him, he deserves to be laid to rest according to tradition. I'll take care of it."

"Meanwhile, something's definitely not kosher," Oliver highlighted. "Strange thefts, super villains with their heads wired to short out if you question them... we've got a real mystery developing here."

"True," the Martian Manhunter agreed, "but it's a mystery you'll have to solve without me." Looking at Diana, he continued, "I've been thinking about what you've said, and about the horrible despair of Prince John's life. I'm a Martian; I'll live far longer than he did. And unless I find a way to connect with humanity, I'll live out that time totally alone. I can't learn what I need to learn on the Watchtower."

Harry patted the extraterrestrial on the back as the group began breaking up. "If it's a meditative vacation you want, I recommend starting with the Himalayan Mountains in Tibet," Harry confided. "The monks there are very helpful. It's probably the single most peaceful place you'll find on this Earth."

"Thank you," J'onn answered gravely.

"Hey," Harry shrugged as he wandered off towards the pier, "what are friends for?"

As the other Leaguers were reassuring the delegation, Harry caught the attention of Agent Faraday and motioned him over to the water's edge. A few feet out into the sea, several other federal agents were hurriedly dismantling the various weapons systems and other valuable gear on the rogue submarine.

Gesturing to the activity, Harry inquired as to their intent with the vessel.

"It's too antiquated for the United States Navy," the white-haired man responded. "We're going to scrap out any of the equipment that we can use and then scuttle her."

"Such a waste..." Harry murmured mournfully before the metaphorical light bulb lit up over his head. Smiling, the wizard looked back to the other man and said, "Mate, I've got a proposition for you..."

After a rather impressive display of magic, Harry had thawed the skiff from its resting place and levitated it into an awaiting Javelin. Taking their cargo up to the space station, the group made arrangements for the Viking's sendoff, finally deciding to release him into the sun so as to prevent any adversaries from regaining his corpse.

After Harry used a banishing charm to release their freight, he joined several members of the League as Diana unrolled a copy of the ancient Norse funeral rites. Facing the window displaying the slowly receding wooden boat, she began reading the English translation. With a discrete wave of Harry's wand, the funeral barge became alight in blue flames as the Amazon recited the text.

When she finished, the others slowly dispersed until only Harry and Diana remained. "That was a nice gesture," the Amazon mentioned, "though fire normally doesn't burn in the vacuum of space."

Harry shrugged from his place at the window. With his back still to her, he answered quietly, "It seemed appropriate."

"What's wrong?" Diana asked, picking up on his subdued manner.

"It's nothing," Harry answered as he quickly blanked his expression. "Just stray thoughts. Don't trouble yourself over them."

Harry suddenly smiled slightly and changed the topic. "Thank you for the entertainment, by the way. The rest of the snobs were boring; all they would talk about was their new palaces or cars or other meaningless topics – worthless chatter. You helped spice things up nicely!"

Diana smiled a little sheepishly. "I've never been much for diplomacy," she admitted.

Harry shrugged. "Hey, you've already got me beat!" the wizard pledged. "I don't usually stop to bandy words with my opponents; I just take them down as quickly as I can. It seems to work for me," he finished humorously.

Diana smiled at the sentiment that so closely resembled her own people's chosen method of 'diplomacy'. "You're not at all like I expected you to be," Diana professed after a few moments of silence.

"Oh?" Harry asked curiously, "and how did you expect me to be?"

"Well, not so personable, for one thing," the Amazon supplied. "No offense, but most of your male kin that I've met never failed to lord their power over everyone else."

Harry half-grinned sadly. "None taken. I generally get into disputes with that sort myself. Some of the finer points can get... interesting." He thought about all of the self-centered wizards and witches he had encountered over the years. Voldemort and his lot were bad enough - what with their genocidal tendencies – but the average wizarding public was the worst. Be they pureblood or mixed, the magical populace seemed somehow convinced of their own superiority over the non-wizarding races. "What most of my kind seem to forget is that they are just as fallible as anyone else and that - despite their power - there is much that they can learn from the 'weaker' peoples."

Diana blinked. "That's a... unique point of view," she conceded.

Harry nodded while stifling a grin. "Yeah, I suppose it is. I've caught a lot of flack because of it over the years, but the old man is of a similar mind and his opinion is generally enough to shut the rest of them up." Harry thought for a moment. "Well, except for the few really rotten apples, but they've been dealt with already."

"The 'old man'?" Diana questioned. Inwardly, she was slightly appalled at the disrespectful nickname.

The wizard just dipped his head, oblivious to her plight. "It's one of my pet names for our old teacher. You've never met him – obviously - but he's an all right guy. Meddles a little too much for my comfort, but he means well. In my opinion, his only real flaw is the whole 'second chance' syndrome. I mean, there was this blonde 'pretty boy' – whom I shall evermore refer to as Lucy – who put on a friendly face and then insulted the old coot repeatedly. Everyone knew where the git's allegiances lay, but the codger wouldn't let anyone do anything about it. I would have been more than pleased to eviscerate the idiot, but..." Harry shrugged. "What's a guy to do? You tell him stuff like this and he just puts on his 'all knowing' face, smiles, tells you that he's holding out for their redemption, and then offers you lemon drops!"

Harry turned back to the window and attempted to unclench his fists as the still-sore memories of his interactions with Dumbledore's 'greater good' philosophy replayed in his mind. "I promise you one thing; if I had been calling the shots, I would have just killed the cretin. No trials, no listening to falsified 'I'm innocent' acts – I'd just cut off his lying, murderous head and been done with it!"

Finally succeeding in calming himself, Harry turned back and concluded, "Ah, well. What's done is done, and here we are." He then took a closer look at the Amazon, only to find her grinning strangely. If he did not know better, he would almost believe her to be nervous. "Are you feeling alright?" Harry asked concernedly.

"Oh, yes," she said quickly. "I was just remembering that I needed to ask... if the medbay gave you any problems! Yes... you see, they can be sort of... invasive. Hehehe," she laughed weakly.

Harry smiled rather sheepishly. "Well... I've never exactly liked hospital wings of any sort, and I feel perfectly fine, so..."

"What?" she demanded sharply, a one hundred-eighty turn around from her previous mood. The inquisitive tone was so abrupt that Harry was oddly reminded of Hermione right before she began discussing the welfare of House Elves or 'Hogwarts, A History.'

"You get yourself down to medical right now, Mister!" the Amazon princess commanded. "I don't care if you're... oh," she cut her rant off as if suddenly remembering whom she was addressing.

Suddenly flushing an interesting shade of red, she stammered, "Right... well... I'll just go let them know to expect you later, okay?" Without waiting for a reply, Diana did a sharp about-face and began walking away rapidly.

Harry felt one eyebrow rise drastically as he watched her retreating back.

'Nice woman,' the wizard thought as he made his own way back towards his quarters for a short rest after the morning's festivities. 'Bit strange, though.'

After Green Lantern's report the previous evening, thoughts pertaining to the mysterious Mr. Black invaded Wally West's mind and continued haunting him throughout the remainder of the evening. When you consider the fact that the Flash normally had the attention span of a gnat, this was an achievement of note. With such an unprecedented fixation distracting him, the red-headed speedster ultimately decided to approach the mysterious Mr. Black and interrogate him in some inconspicuous way.

Which, of course, led the 'Fastest Man Alive' to start rapidly knocking on the other man's door approximately ten seconds after he left his 'non-powered' job for the day.

As soon as the door opened, Flash executed his carefully preparing conversation opener. "Oh, hi, Mr. Black! I haven't gotten to really talk to you properly since you arrived, and I just wanted to say 'hi'! I heard you caught a couple of movies last night; I hope you had fun at the cinema."

The other man just blinked at the stream of consciousness. A few moments later, Harry finally managed to reply, "I did, thanks. It was very entertaining. Won't you come in?" the man finished with a smile.

"Cool!" Flash accepted, closing the door behind him. He gave a cursory glance around at the cluttered room filled with unidentifiable knick-knacks before once more addressing the room's new owner. "I've heard you took the girls for a trip to Vegas. You like traveling?"

"Considering that I've traveled all over the world and enjoyed most of it, I would have to answer with a definite 'yes'. The traveling bit is sort of fun, but it's the experience that you truly enjoy."

"Really?" Flash asked courteously.

Harry nodded. "Oh, yeah. For example, when I think that most people will never learn the location of Shangri La..."

"Sounds cool," the speed demon admitted, even as he decided not to risk frying his brain by pursuing the topic. Switching gears, he asked, "Ever been to Egypt? I was thinking of going there for a vacation myself, but I don't know anyone who has actually been there and seen it."

'Please don't let this be too obvious!' Flash prayed to whatever cosmic force wished to listen.

"Well, yeah, I've been there," Harry answered helpfully. "I don't know if I'll be much help, though. I was rather busy at the time and didn't get to do much of the normal tourist thing. However, I should be able to answer any questions you might have up until the end of the pharaohs' era."

Flash took a deep breath. 'Casual conversation. Remember that, Flash my man. Just keep things casual...'

"Well, the ancient stuff seems more interesting, anyway," Flash decided. "So, what interesting things are there to see?"

"Hmm," Harry mused. "Well, I enjoyed the Alexandrian Library last time I was there. They have some of the most interesting texts I've ever read..." Harry suddenly made a face and snapped his fingers. "Oh, right. You won't be able to see it anymore. However, you can still see the Great Pyramids at Giza – at least, I think you still can."

Harry smiled to himself and looked back at the costumed hero. "If your archeologists have discovered the secret chambers there, I'd recommend paying close attention to the hieroglyphics on their walls. The workers left a few... amusing anecdotes behind."

"Great..." Wally said in a voice somewhat weaker than he wanted. 'Gotta distract him! Gotta distract him. Think, Wally boy! Think! What would the Lone Ranger do? Got it!'

"Oh, and by the way – do you think that it's safe enough?" he desperately asked, if for no other reason than to prevent his mind from overloading.

The other man shrugged. "Well, I suppose it would be a pretty safe assumption that you can go there and back safely." The wizard's expression grew grim. "Unlike some people I knew."

Wally's self-preservation instinct suddenly made its presence known by screaming, 'Change the subject, Idiot! For the love of God, change the subject!'

"Err, well, what I meant to actually say was... I didn't want to be bothered by work when I'm taking a break, you know?" Wally's mind was signaling that it wanted out of this conversation as fast as possible.

Preferably even faster.

To his surprise, Mr. Black actually laughed at that.

"I know exactly what you mean," the wizard reported. "When I was there last, I had to free some decent folk from a particularly nasty group of Egyptian filth. The whole thing turned out all right in the end, but there was a certain... minor amount of bloodshed involved."

The man shrugged. "It was more involved than I originally anticipated, but the good guys lived and the bad guys... well... didn't."

"Right..." Flash felt more than a little bit sick. "So... maybe Egypt isn't the best idea after all."

"Well, if you are looking for an interesting country with a humid climate and a lot of old buildings, I recommend Italy. Overall, it's pretty nice, and if books are your thing, the Vatican has an excellent collection. Not as grand as Alexandria's library, but... hey, what can you do? Granted, Italy's had its share of idiots where I was concerned, but still... the whole thing ended for them much worse than for me."

He smiled grimly. "As luck would have it, I bought this handy little pugio a few days earlier. The bunch of idiots seemed to really

appreciate my effort on their behalf, and it cost me only two aurei." He pulled an old looking dagger out of his now-standard black coat's inner pocket and showed it to the other man.

Flash made the obligatory inspection of the proffered weapon before returning it to its owner. "Neat," he said shakily. "I might just try Italy then."

'Just finish this conversation,' the fastest man alive thought to himself. 'It can't be that hard.'

"Glad I could help," Harry smiled at his guest before looking at his watch. "Now, I'm afraid I need to be going. I have something of a dinner date with Kara, and I would really hate to be late."

Flash nodded sharply. "Sure. Have fun." The wizard followed him through the door. Giving a friendly wave, the scarlet speedster watched as the man disappeared into thin air.

Blinking, Wally spoke his thoughts aloud. "I've definitely have to get this out of my system! I think it's time for another quick meeting..."

"So why did you call us here exactly, Wally?" Diana asked five minutes later.

Of the seven original leaguers, J'onn was now 'off the grid' and Batman was busy patrolling 'his' city - leaving Diana, John, Shayera, and Clark for Flash to track down. "I've got some news that you're not gonna believe," the fastest man alive alleged.

"Which is..." the Green Lantern prompted.

"Well, I've been thinking about what GL and S.T.R.I.P.E. told us yesterday about Mr. Black," Flash admitted, "and I just finished talking to him about tourism."

"So...?" Diana asked confusedly.

Wally looked a little disconcerted. "Err...", he stammered, "I sorta asked him about... Ancient Egypt." The last couple of words were rushed through but still intelligible for his colleagues.

"Wally!" Shayera interjected. "Did you not think this through at all?"

"No, he was okay about it, really," Flash assured them. "He even mentioned that he really enjoyed the Alexandrian Library last time he was there. But then he seemed to remember that I won't be able to see it for some reason."

Diana looked at him funnily. "Like the simple fact that the Royal Library of Alexandria was destroyed nearly two millennia ago, perhaps?" the Amazon offered.

"Umm... yeah, that might be why he said he can't help me with any modern buildings and most of the old ones he knows date back to the time of the pharaohs," Wally agreed.

John Stewart was barely able to control his enthusiasm over this new source of information. "So did you ask him about...?"

Wally nodded. "Yeah, but it was strange. He stood there – right next to me - and casually described how a minor – minor, mind you – amount of bloodshed was needed to enable 'the good guys' to regain their freedom and escape from the Egyptians."

"What else did you learn?" Diana inquired.

"Well, he mentioned that there are still undiscovered secret chambers in the Great Pyramids and, if one follows the instructions on the wall, it's not hard to open," Wally supplied. "He also said something about knowing the location of Shangri La; that was before we discussed Egypt, though. Mr. Black also mentioned that I may like Italy better than Egypt even though, unlike the Israelites, I shouldn't have any problems with coming back from it." Flash shrugged. "Not sure why, really."

"Did he say anything special about Italy?" Clark was becoming curious now

Wally shook his head. "Not much. Mentioned something about the books in the library at the Vatican not being quite as numerous as the ones in Alexandria and then told me some story that didn't make much sense."

"What story?" Superman pressed.

"That, when he was in Italy, he encountered a few lunatics but that everything ended for them much worse than for him. Then he told me that, a few days before he met them, he bought a pugio and that he was glad he did. Apparently, he wasn't able to get any of them after that. He showed me the thing, too. Said he paid two aurei for it."

Flash looked thoughtful for a moment. "That's about it, I think."

"Two aurei?" Diana confirmed.

"That's what he said," the speedster confirmed. "I have no idea how much it is since I've never heard of the currency before."

"It's a gold coin worth 25 silver denari," Diana informed the group. "It was put out of use in the beginning of the 4th century."

"Can you describe the weapon?" Shayera asked her speedy teammate.

"Let me think... leaf-shaped blade, a bit over two inches in width and nine inches in length. It had the word 'Atrum' or 'Atrus' written on it. Looked old-fashioned, obviously..."

"Was the hilt riveted through the shoulders of the blade?" the Amazon asked intently.

For a short moment, Wally just stared. "No, I don't think so..." he answered eventually.

"And you are sure that the blade was wider than two inches?" she pressed.

At Flash's confirmation, Diana blinked. "That weapon is over nineteen centuries old!" she breathed.

"So... how does that help us?" Superman asked a few moments later.

"Well, if Wally read the word right, it might have been customized on his order. Provided that it's an original, of course," Diana answered distractedly. "Did you see on which hip he wore it?"

Flash looked away for a second. "Well, I didn't see a scabbard, but he drew it from under the right side of his coat."

"Like one of the nobles..." Diana muttered. "Not a mere legionnaire."

"Let's see what we can find out now that we know approximately when it was manufactured," Shayera commented as she moved to one of the computing consoles. "I've already put the data in the computer. We should have the results in a second."

Pictures of different pugios appeared on the screen. Wally took a good look at them before pointing at one in particular. "It looks just like that one, except his has that inscription and is in better shape."

"Let's see..." Clark selected the dagger in question and scanned through the accompanying text. "It looks like that one was only made in... Pompeii?"

John snorted. "Ten bucks says that the pugio in question was made around 79 A.D. Now, I wonder what our Mr. Black could have been doing there at that point in time..." he asked rhetorically.

"I know one thing; I won't ask him for tourist tips again!" Flash professed. "I'm not looking forward to learning why he's portrayed as walking on the streets during the plague epidemics or why they call it the 'Black Death.'"

"By the way... where is he now?" Superman asked Wally.

"Oh, he said something about... taking Kara on a dinner date," Flash trailed off towards the end.

Unfortunately for him, the Kryptonian's superior hearing still caught the gist of his comment.

"He WHAT?"

"So... this is Oliver's, huh?" Harry asked his blonde companion as they beamed down planet-side. "And you said that it's supposed to be a good Italian joint?"

"The best," Kara responded confidently before brushing an imaginary piece of lint off her navy blue dress.

"And I have to wear the tie?" he confirmed yet again while tugging on the aforementioned article. If only he had known that his little 'good deed' for Diana would have sparked this...

'Well. There's no help for it,' Harry silently concluded.

"Yes!" the girl answered, equal parts amused and resigned. Smoothing out his tie and fixing his coat – again –, the Argosian took possession of Harry's arm and began dragging him towards the entrance. "It's your own fault, you know," she said placidly. "You're the one who took Diana on a formal date to that global warming thingy. If you wore a tux for her, then it's only right that you wear one for me!"

Harry looked more than a little confused at her train of logic. "I suppose that makes sense..." the wizard answered tentatively.

"Of course it does!" Kara said exuberantly as the two entered the establishment. Once more allowing everyone present to witness a 5'-4" blonde girl dragging a 5'-11" black-haired man around like a toy, Kara escorted her date to the attendant's booth. "Black, party of two," she announced to the patiently waiting employee, who proceeded to check his list.

"Ah, of course! Right this way!" the waiter invited.

Harry looked over at his companion in confusion. "We had to have a reservation?" he questioned.

"Uh huh..." Kara answered simply.

"In advance?" he prompted.

She nodded. "Yeah, since yesterday."

"And you used my name?" he inquired.

Shrugging, Kara said, "Well, I thought that I would save you the trouble of calling them yourself."

Harry smiled despite himself. "How... thoughtful of you," he answered a few moments later.

"I try," she replied modestly.

"Clark, are you sure that this is a good idea?" John asked the Man of Steel yet again.

Not turning away from his feverish attempts to access the communications system, the Kryptonian just bit out, "Of course!"

Diana sighed. "Kal, she's perfectly fine," the Amazon pointed out. "You don't have to go charging down there just because Kara's decided to start dating. Mr. Black has been a perfect gentleman ever since we met him. I know she's your cousin, but-"

"Diana," he said carefully, "she's flirting with certain Death – literally! And besides, I don't have to 'go charging down there' just yet."

"What do you-?" was all Wonder Woman could get out before the console Clark was manipulating finally resolved into a video stream obviously originating from a security camera. The surveillance system was installed in what appeared to be an upscale restaurant. As luck would have it, the camera provided an acceptable image of the two people in question. Using another trick he picked up from his pointy-eared teammate, Clark added the audio signal from Kara's comm. unit to the display.

After the two teenagers had placed their orders, – Harry thought he was getting some variant of Fettuccini – he and Kara spent the next few moments just staring at one another.

"So... do you come here often?" Harry asked with a quirked eyebrow.

The blonde-haired woman snorted at the clichéd conversation opener. "No, I actually don't date all that much, and there's not much of a point coming to places like this by myself."

"Not a big dater, then?" Harry asked curiously.

Kara smiled ruefully. "Most guys seem a little skittish around me for some reason. Apparently, a girl who can bench several tons is too intimidating to be considered date-able. And when you throw in a certain overbearing cousin of mine..."

"Hmm... he seemed like an alright bloke to me," Harry pondered. "Well, you can set your mind at ease. After the life I've led, I don't scare all that easy. In fact, I sincerely doubt that there is anything that you – or your cousin – could do that would sincerely endanger me."

"Keeping in mind that the individual in question nominally chairs an entire space station full of metas floating above us?" she asked incredulously.

Harry snorted derisively as he thought back to all the other conflicts he dodged in his lifetime. "That's one of the few perks of my peculiar... situation," he said darkly. "In fact, I'll give you ten-to-one odds that you, and your cousin, and the rest of the League could throw everything you've got at me and—at the end of the day—I'd still be here without even have a scratch on me."

The wizard seemed to consider his last statement. "And then I'd be obliged to respond. It's hard to fear an organization if you can idly think up over a dozen ways to utterly destroy it. So, no, I'm not intimidated in the slightest." Harry cocked his head to the side as he studied his dining partner. "In fact, I find you rather interesting."

"Really?" Kara asked a little disbelievingly. Here was an immortal being who apparently could remake reality as he saw fit, and he found her interesting? "How so? I mean, I just fly around and punch things."

Harry chuckled. "That's actually part of it," he admitted. "You look like a woman, you talk like a woman, you even walk like a woman – but you fight like a man. I suppose I found that contrast intriguing. Not to mention the extraterrestrial ancestry as well." He made a lazy circular motion with one hand. "And then there are all the other members to consider. You have Diana, who shares the same qualities that I just mentioned. Shayera, a woman who - I'm sure - has been mistaken for an angel more than once; who also happens to be an extraterrestrial and the only woman I've ever met who uses a mace that enthusiastically. Your cousin, Lantern, Flash, an actual Martian – all of whom have their own interesting abilities and backgrounds. I mean, you even have a normal non-powered human as one of your founding members, whose inventiveness seems surpassed solely by his appalling lack of manners."

Harry made a shooing gesture. "And that's ignoring the several hundred other members that have joined in the past couple of years."

Kara blinked at his comprehensive assessment of the inner council. "What did you do?" she asked jokingly. "Review the entire member database?"

"Yep," he answered promptly, "last night. I figured that if I'm actually going out on missions, I should at least know who I'm working with."

"But how did you find the time?" Kara blurted. "I mean, that had to be hundreds if not thousands of hours of video footage alone! Not to mention all the text documents!"

"Reviewing both took about one thousand, two hundred, and sixty four hours, actually," Harry specified. "As for the other part of your question, time isn't that hard to manipulate if you know what you're doing."

Kara looked more than a little shocked. "Are you saying that you stopped time while you were doing that?"

Harry looked at her askance. "No, not at all! I mean, you couldn't do much of anything if time was frozen, now could you?" As Kara seemed to breath a sigh of relief, Harry calmly added, "I kept going back into the past a few hours at a time and reviewed the information that way."

"Umm... did he say what I thought he just said?" Flash voiced in an otherwise silent room.

"Well..." John offered, "That would explain how one person can collect the souls of billions of people as they die."

Flash seemed to think on that for a minute before fashioning a reply.

"Do you think that's how Santa Claus does it?"

Harry almost laughed at the bug-eyed look Kara was giving him, but he held it in.

Barely.

"So, you can control time?" she finally asked a few minutes later.

Harry just nodded, a grin playing at his lips.

Shaking her head, Kara asked, "Are you sure you should be discussing things like this in public?"

Harry finally let the persistent grin show. "Don't worry. I've put up a ward to discourage eavesdropping. The only way someone could hear what we're saying is if you're bugged."

"What, you mean like... listening through my comm. link or something?" Kara questioned.

Harry nodded. "Exactly," the wizard confirmed.

"That's impossible!" Kara blurted. "The only people that could do that would be the members of the inner council, and they wouldn't do that!"

"If you say so," Harry shrugged.

Clark hurriedly cancelled the monitoring routines, much to the amusement of his colleagues.

"Uh oh... Supes got busted!" Flash called out as he capered around the room.

"I hate to tell you this," the Green Lantern added laughingly, "but you're in for it if Mr. Black informs your 'cousin' what you've been doing."

This statement prompted Diana to add her own two cents into the discussion. "I told you that she was in good hands and that you shouldn't interfere."

Superman took the gibes in his typical unflappable manner before silencing his teammates with one statement.

"If he knew about the bug, do you really think that he doesn't know who was listening?"

Oddly enough, the other meta-humans were suddenly much more subdued.

Kara struggled for something else to discuss. "So, uh... any luck finding a way back to... wherever it is you're from?"

"No, I'm afraid that their transporter is still off-line," Harry said easily. "It will probably take a while longer."

"You don't seem all that upset. Don't you miss your home?" she questioned, ignoring the inappropriate glee she felt at hearing that he would not be leaving anytime soon.

He smiled sadly. "I've never really had a home," he admitted. "I've had a couple of good friends to invite me into their homes, but I don't belong there. I even own a few houses, but I don't really belong there either." The wizard looked pensive. "I suppose that I don't belong anywhere."

"You belong here, with us!" Kara said honestly.

Harry gave a muffled laugh at her exuberant reply. "I'm welcomed here," he stressed. Seeming to shake the depressing subject away, he continued, "But enough about me and my social inadequacies. Let's talk about you. What's it like growing up on a farm?"

Kara rolled her eyes at the clumsy change in topic and vowed to herself to alleviate the pain she had just witnessed.

"Well, Kansas can be summarized in one word: flat. The fields go on forever and..."

The conference room's intercom sounded, interrupting John's attempts to prove that Santa Claus did not, in fact, exist.

"Yes? Can I help you?" Clark asked while pressing the send button.

"Yes... umm, Superman? This is Denise Miles down in Medlab Four. Do you still want to be notified of any unusual occurrences?"

"That's correct, Miss Miles," the Man of Steel confirmed. "I take it that something strange has happened."

"You could say that," the bewildered voice responded. "Can you access the file for 'Mr. Black'?"

"Just a moment," he instructed as Shayera opened the appropriate directory on the League's mainframe. As he expected, there was precious little information available. "All right. Go ahead."

"Open the lab report from about three hours ago," Denise ordered. The Thanagarian did so before swearing under her breath. Clark looked over her shoulder to determine why and suddenly felt a similar desire.

"Whoa!" the Green Lantern exclaimed. "Is this for real?"

Thanks to Clark having placed the communications panel on hands-free, the lab technician heard the man's query. "I'm afraid so. We obtained the blood sample without incident and did a quick scan earlier for traces of Devil Ray's toxin. That showed up negative, so we cleared Mr. Black to leave. It was only when we started running the normal battery of tests that all these irregularities began appearing."

Diana cocked her head to the side as she was looking at a magnified view of a DNA strand. "What are we looking for, exactly?" she asked confusedly. "Genetic theory isn't exactly my specialty, but isn't that what it's supposed to look like?"

Denise picked up the answer. "The helical strands do resemble human DNA on the surface, but that's about it. Besides the genetic material for a human male in his prime, we've also isolated the genetic patterns for bats, a variant of the wolf genome, reptilian traces from at least two separate sources, and an odd avian genome as well. In addition, we have no classification for a few other patterns."

"What else can you tell us?" Clark inquired.

"The cells multiply at an amazing rate, nearly a hundred times that of a human," the lab technician answered excitedly. "And it's a perfect duplication as well; the copied chromosomes are the exact same length as the originals."

"And that means...?" Diana pressed.

Denise laughed slightly. "That this guy's never gonna have to worry about wrinkles."

"So he is immortal?" Clark clarified.

"Well, old age definitely isn't going to be a problem. Moreover, his system will never succumb to poison – the little amount that we withdrew seems to be the single most volatile substance I've ever seen. Every toxin analysis that we've run has ended the same way; the blood sample immediately overpowers the other compound and absorbs it, inoculating itself in the process as it becomes even more venomous. If this guy opened a vein in a large city's water supply, he could kill hundreds. Thousands, even!"

"I... see," Clark said finally. "Thank you, Denise. Is there anything else?"

"Loads!" The woman sounded excited, for goodness's sake! "When the toxicology reports came back with that, we ran the whole gauntlet; radiation, intentional mutation... the works. Nothing phases this stuff! So, seeing this energetic of a reaction we began combing the cells over, looking for where all of these responses were drawing their power."

"And...?" Shayera pressed impatiently. "Did you find it?"

"Oh, we found it alright," the lab tech confirmed. "We even measured its potential energy that this sample has stored. Just for clarification, you are aware that the human body possesses a certain biological current, on the order of approximately five milliamperes?"

"Yes," John spoke up, "So?"

"Well, Mr. Black's cells were charged to about twenty," the woman replied.

"Milliamps?" the ex-Marine qualified.

"Amps," Denise said resolutely. "It's like the guy's carrying around a power plant in his veins. What we can't figure out is what all of this energy is fuelling."

"Oh, we have some ideas," Clark said resolutely. "Thank you for your time, Denise."

"Anytime, Sir," she replied before breaking a connection.

The five looked at each other before Flash broke the silence. "Well, I think that I've had enough for the evening. Good night." An instant later, the Flash was gone.

"Yeah, what he said," John seconded, before exiting the room at a more normal pace.

"I think I may just go get drunk about now," Shayera thought aloud as the remaining three prepared to leave.

Diana laughed for a moment. "I think I may just join you."

"- and the worst thing was that we didn't find the tractor for a week!" Kara finished blushing.

Harry finally lost his battle to retain his composure and finally burst out laughing. When he was once more capable of speech, the wizard inquired, "So, let me get this straight; you're virtually invulnerable and you can survive in vacuum, but you get hay fever so badly that one time you accidentally sneezed at your grandfather's tractor and blew it out of the county? Moreover, you managed to land it in a lake so that neither you nor Superman could locate it for an entire week?"

He broke out laughing again. "I had no idea that farm life could be so entertaining!"

"Yeah, yeah! Laugh it up!" Kara muttered, obviously still embarrassed over the ordeal.

"I'm sorry," he said insincerely as he wiped his eyes with the back of his shirtsleeve. "I'll be good, honest."

Kara rolled her eyes. "If you're about done... perhaps we can leave now?"

Harry shrugged as he threw a few bills down on the table and jumped to his feet. Giving the blonde-haired woman a hand out of her own chair, the mage looked down and asked, "So, what now, boss lady?"

"I didn't actually have anything else planned, to be honest," the undercover Supergirl confessed. "What do you have on your mind?"

Harry thought for a second before smiling. "Have you ever been deep-sea fishing?" he inquired.

"No..." she admitted slowly. "Why?"

"Well... I sorta picked up a boat, and I was wondering if you would help me break it in?" Harry said easily.

"Sure, we can give it a spin," Kara agreed. "Where is it moored?"

Harry guided the girl back into the adjacent alley. Once the two were out of sight, Harry Apparated them both to the nearby seashore. Before the Argosian could comment on the lack of ships, Harry withdrew the shrunken vessel and placed it in the water. Another spell immediately followed, returning the now 'officially decommissioned' submarine to its proper dimensions.

"Uhm... exactly what kind of fish are you hunting? Moby Dick?" she asked disbelievingly.

Harry had taken her moment of shock to conjure a good replica of the antique tri-corn hats. Grinning brightly, he placed the relic on his head before gesturing to the vessel. "Well, Lantern had told me that he enjoyed deep-sea fishing and it would be rather hard to find a fishing trawler that can go deeper than this," he answered innocently.

"I would suppose so," Kara answered distractedly, still unable to comprehend what defined normality for her companion. "But most people just settle for a ship with taller walls so it doesn't capsize when out at sea. This is so..."

"This one won't capsize either," Harry assured the girl.

"But it's a freaking submarine!" she blurted.

Harry nodded his head sharply. "Yep," he agreed, before offering her his arm. "Shall we?"

The blonde extra-terrestrial finally shook off the incredulous response this whole scene had caused her. After all, after witnessing the same individual ride a ghost horse, teleport on his own, break every known law regarding probability, and generally rewrite reality to suit himself, carrying around an actual submarine in his pocket barely even rated.

"Why not?" she returned his grin, before flying the pair of them to the entrance hatch. A few moments later found the magically enhanced vessel gracefully sliding beneath the waves.

A/N: Well, this concludes Chapter Four of the MaW/JLA Crossover. I still haven't come up with a title for this story that I like yet, and would welcome your suggestions. I would also like to thank James and Patrick for their assistance with proofreading this chapter, as well as the many of you who contributed the inspiring drabbles I incorporated into this chapter (such as the Mr. Black/Flash scene or Batman and Alfred's tête-à-tête).

I hope you found this latest submission to be worth the wait, and I await your reviews/suggestions/etc.

Previous Chapter
Terminal Justice

Chapter 4: It's Lonely at the Top... But It's Got a Swell View
by Overkill

Next Chapter

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Chapter 5: An Unusually Powerful Wizard By Any Other Name... by Overkill

Next Chapter

Disclaimer: This is a cross between JLA (Season 5) and Rorschach's Blot's Make A Wish Story. Harry Potter is owned by JK Rowling and various publishers. Henchgirl, The Professor, and other such objects are Rorschach's creation. DC Comics own the Justice League and associated characters/plot devices. The lack of plot, however, can be attributed to me.

An Unusually Powerful Wizard By Any Other Name...

"All right, Agent Faraday, I'm listening. You said that a detail regarding your last assignment warrants my attention?"

"Yes, Mr. President," the secret service agent replied. "During the altercation, we were assisted by a handful of Justice League members, chief among them Ambassador Diana of Themyscira. As well as her attendant," he added.

"And your point is...?" the United States' leader inquired.

"The attendant is an anomaly," the agent reported. "He introduced himself as Mr. Black, but there is virtually no information on him, either in their records or ours. According to the League's database, he just showed up a week ago and 'accidentally' resolved a hostage situation. Apparently, he has joined the League on a trial basis and has been sent on a couple of missions already."

"I still don't see what part of this involves me," his superior replied. "Amanda Waller oversees the Department of Meta-human Affairs, not I."

"Yes, sir," Faraday replied, "I was just getting to that. It appears that no one – not even the League's inner council – know anything about him. We have no data on his origins, abilities, or motivations. All I have are their suspicions and my own observations." The agent went on to summarize the reports before informing his superior of the actions at the Global Warming conference.

"I see..." the President finally said after King Faraday finished. "So, we are faced with a possible god – definitely a supernatural being of some sort – who has no qualms with using lethal force, and whose powers appear to be innumerable. Moreover, for all we know, he might decide tomorrow that he dislikes this administration enough to warrant its elimination – and neither the Justice League nor our own military can stop him?"

"Based on assumptions from the available data... you are correct, Sir," Agent Faraday agreed.

"This is unacceptable!" the other man suddenly shouted. "I don't care how old he is, or what power he possesses. I will not allow such a potential threat unrestricted access to this nation. And what reason on God's little green Earth would convince you that selling this man a working diesel submarine was a good idea?"

"The vessel has been stripped of all combat equipment. We were preparing to scrap her when Mr. Black offered to pay a premium to purchase the remains – 'for recreational and educational purposes'. It poses no threat, Sir," King summarized. "In fact, my team outfitted the vessel with a comprehensive tracking system. Hopefully, this information will allow us better insight into what his intentions are."

The older man took several deep, calming breaths. "I apologize for my outburst, Agent Faraday, and I agree with your reasoning. Do you know what his first port of call was?"

"No, Sir," Faraday admitted. "To the best of my knowledge, he has not yet sailed the vessel."

"So he just left the boat behind?" the older man questioned bewilderedly.

"No, Sir," the agent said a little more hesitantly. "He... pocketed it, Mr. President."

"Come again?" his commanding officer said lowly.

"The man shrunk the 150 foot vessel down to a six inch model and placed it in his coat pocket, Sir."

Silence reigned for the next several seconds in the oval office. "I see..." its owner finally mentioned levelly. "If that is all?"

King took the hint and quietly dismissed himself, sealing the Presidential office behind him.

Once he was alone, the President reached for his phone and dialed a number that had received several calls of late. "Amanda?" he asked. "We have a situation."

Batman was just finishing his patrol of Gotham when he heard Dick's voice in his communicator.

"Wherever you are, come quickly. Something happened to Alfred."

Upon hearing that, Batman started driving back towards the cave at a speed that would give anyone certain of his lack of powers second thoughts.

"What happened?" he inquired on the way.

"No idea. We came back and found him upstairs pale and hardly responding. I left Tim with him and came down to inform you. Ambulance is on the way."

"I'll be there as soon as possible," Batman informed his adopted son. "Go upstairs in case your assistance is needed."

True to his word, in less than two minutes the Caped Crusader was back in the Batcave. Stopping only long enough to shed his costume, Bruce ran up the stone stairs two at a time.

Locating the room housing his second father by following the stressed voices, Bruce strode to the old man's side. "Alfred!" Upon a lack of response, his mind hardly registered that he checked the man's vital signs. Pulse was dangerously weak and breathing shallow.

"Don't worry, Alfred. Help is on the way," he promised. As if his words were a signal, the sounds of an ambulance were heard approaching the manor.

"I'll get the door!" Tim volunteered.

It seemed to take ages before the medical personal came. Bruce listened to the running steps as he held the hand of his adoptive father. The trip to the hospital seemed to take even longer, and the wait for the doctor's verdict seemed to last an eternity.

"Mr. Wayne?" an older voice roused his attention.

Bruce jerked his head up to see a gray-haired physician holding a clipboard. "Yes?" he demanded urgently. "Do you finally know what's wrong? Can you help him? Expense is not an issue!" Bruce fired off nervously, reading something in the man's expression that he didn't like.

"I'm afraid that this problem cannot be resolved by any financial means, Mr. Wayne. Mr. Pennyworth's malady stems from his advancing age, and I'm afraid that that condition simply cannot be treated."

"Age?" Bruce echoed strangely.

The doctor nodded. "Yes. There must have been slight symptoms – warning signs, of a sort – in recent weeks, but they would have served no purpose except for informing you sooner."

"Informing me of what?" Bruce asked intently.

"That Alfred Pennyworth is dying. What you witnessed was the final stage of Macgregor's Syndrome, and there is no cure available."

"Dying?" Bruce uttered duly. The word somehow seemed too abstract to fit reality.

"He has only a few hours – perhaps a day - to live," the old physician said gently. "We can't do anything more for him. I'm sorry."

"There... there has to be something you can do!" the scion of the Wayne family pleaded.

"I'm afraid that there isn't. We have already done everything we could. If it is any consolation, we have made his remaining time in this world peaceful – he won't suffer. You may transport him back to

your home if you wish, to pass his remaining time in more comfortable surroundings."

Bruce was now paler than the white walls surrounding him. "Are you sure there isn't anything...?" he pleaded again.

"Mr. Wayne, I'm sorry to have to tell you this, but there is nothing else we humans can do. One cannot simply buy someone more life. When our time comes, we have no choice but to accept it. Not even modern medicine can work miracles, and there is no negotiating with death."

At that, the Batman's reportedly stone heart skipped a beat. Turning swiftly, he stormed out of hospital while calling to Dick to arrange the Alfred's move back to the manor. Making his way to an isolated hallway, Bruce dialed the number of a certain Daily Planet reporter.

"Clark?" Bruce questioned as soon as the connection was made.

At the other end of the line, the incognito Kryptonian couldn't help but pick up on the suppressed strain in his friend's voice. "Bruce? Did something happen?" he questioned.

"Yes," Bruce bit out. "Give me the location of Mr. Black."

"I'll get him to the Watchtower. I should be able to reach him through Kara."

After an extended field test of the newly re-commissioned USS Black – extended as in, from the western shore of the United States to the eastern shore of Japan -, Harry brought the underwater craft back to the surface and eased up against the Oriental beach. Popping the top hatch, the two occupants moved back to dry land before the wizard recast the shrinking charm and replaced the re-shrunk vessel within his coat.

"That was so cool!" Kara exclaimed. "I didn't know that the Mariana Trench went that deep!"

Harry made an affirmative noise. "According to what I read, if Mount Everest - the highest mountain on Earth - were placed in the trench, it would be covered by over a mile of water."

Kara looked at her companion suspiciously. "I didn't think that just any submarine could dive to nearly 36,000 feet."

Harry ducked his head and rubbed the back of his neck nervously. "Well... I might have... tweaked it a bit," he finally admitted.

The blonde girl chuckled slightly. "I'll bet you did, Mr. Black," she said lowly before stopping with a puzzled frown. "You know, I still don't know your real name. I mean, when I'm not wearing the cape, I'm just 'Kara'. Who are you when you're off the clock?"

Harry smiled ruefully. "I'm never 'off the clock'. It is true that I once went by another name, but that was a lifetime ago. I was blamed for nearly every bad thing that happened; I was expected to be a force of nature or a weapon rather than a person; if I didn't take steps to disguise myself in public, I was almost always shunned or mobbed..."

He shook his head sadly. "I did several things back then... they weren't nice, and I didn't enjoy doing them, but I don't regret them either; they were necessary. Everything came to a head when I took this one person's life, though. He was an evil creature bent on world domination, and mass genocide was his answer to everything. He was so fearsome that the common people even feared to speak his name, lest they draw his attention upon themselves. His power was absolute; every fighter that went against him, no matter how skilled, failed."

Harry raised his eyes to Kara's once more. "And I killed him with absolutely no effort. I raised my hand against him and all of his power and all of his resources were useless - not a single attempt that he had taken to strengthen himself deterred me in the slightest. It was then, as I looked down at his lifeless corpse without any feeling whatsoever, that I had an epiphany."

The wizard's emerald eyes seemed to harden even further. "I realized that, after all the things I had done, I was as dead as he was. So I quit; I left a note for the precious few people who ever cared about me and I explained that I would be gone indefinitely and then I left. The person I was before died that day; I've been Mr. Black - no more and no less - ever since."

"I'm... sorry," Kara said softly before looking away, rubbed at her eyes sharply.

Harry forcibly banished the old – and still painful – memories to the back of his mind and locked them there. Forcing a smile, he laid a hand on her shoulder and pulled her back around to face him. "Don't worry about it. You didn't know, after all."

The girl smiled brightly – perhaps too brightly – before a thoughtful expression stole over her face. "Well, you can't go through life with a first name of 'Mr', now can you...?"

Harry thought to inform her that he technically had a first name, even if it was as irrational as 'Padamus', when the blonde interrupted his thoughts.

"I've got it!" she announced. "How about... Joe?"

"Joe?" Harry echoed strangely. 'Where on Earth did she get that?' the mage wondered bewilderedly.

"Yeah!" she said enthusiastically. "It flows really well! Listen... 'The name's Black. Joe Black'. Or how about just 'Meet Joe Black'?"

Harry cocked his head to one side. "Oddly enough, it does seem to go together," he thought aloud.

"See! I told you!" Kara said smugly.

Harry had to chuckle slightly at her attempt to improve his mood. "I apologize for ever doubting you," he announced humorously.

Kara's comm. unit suddenly went off, preempting any rejoinder she had planned to make. Thanks to his doubly enhanced hearing, Harry could easily make out Superman's voice as he spoke to the blonde Argosian.

"Kara? Tell Mr. Black that he needs to report to the Watchtower. Batman is looking for him and it seems urgent."

"Sure thing," Kara replied before shutting off the device. "That was Clark. He said-"

"I heard," Harry interrupted. "Thank you for a wonderful time, Kara. Shall we go?" he asked.

"Nah," she finally decided. "Since it's still day time here, I'm got a couple kids to visit. You go ahead; I'll catch up."

"Ah yes," Harry said amusedly. "I forgot about your avid fan base. Well then, I won't keep you any longer. Good evening," he added before Apparating to the orbiting space station's teleportation chamber.

The fact that this transportation took place before Kara could retaliate was completely coincidental.

"You wished to speak with me?" Harry asked nonchalantly when he spotted the Caped Crusader waiting for him impatiently.

"It's a private matter," the other man said while steering Harry to the most isolated corner he could find.

"So... what is it?" Harry prompted when the masked detective seemed to be struggling to say something.

"Listen," he barked, before making an observable effort to soften his tone. "We both know that I take all you say with a certain dose of skepticism. But this is the only chance I have, so I have no alternative but to trust you."

After such a lead-in, he took a breath to calm down. "I don't know if you're aware of the fact, but I was raised by my parent's butler, Alfred Pennyworth."

"Yes, after your parents were killed. You were exiting a cinema after 'The Mask of Zorro' if I remember correctly," Harry replied, thinking back to the files he read. As anal retentive... security conscious as this group seemed to be, Harry still could not fathom why Superman archived a copy of such an informative old newspaper article in Batman's file, especially protected by the password 'Kara' of all things! Combined with clues he picked up from the rest of the League's dossiers, it was not very difficult to piece together the pieces of the Batman's secretive past.

"Yes," Bruce confirmed uncomfortably, "but now I'm about to lose a second father..."

Harry did not know what to say and the topic reminded him a bit too much of his own still-painful loss of Sirius for his liking. His expression grew grim. "And you are telling me this because...?" he demanded.

"The doctors have said that they can't do anything further for Alfred, that none of them have the power to prolong someone's natural lifespan like that..." It was indeed rare to catch the Batman at a loss for words, but the present circumstances rendered him precisely that way. "I was hoping that if there was any possibility... if you could..."

"Let me think," Harry responded while reaching into his pocket, ultimately recovering a small silver hourglass with red sand. It was Henchgirl's idea that he should have a Philosopher's Stone with him at all times - 'just in case'. She remained adamant even when he explained that - as a part-Vampire, part-Werewolf, part-Re'em, part-whatever – it was doubtful he would ever require the restorative. Regardless, the intelligent female insisted that he carry it around in the inconspicuous hourglass-shaped container, and furthermore pressed her point by grinding it into powder for easier ingestion.

"You do know that it's very unwise to interfere in the matters of life and death, do you not?" Harry finally asked.

Batman did not answer as his full attention was focused on the blood red sand slowly slipping downwards in the hourglass.

Harry looked at him, imagining what he would do if there was a power strong enough to grant Sirius a few more years of life. Moreover, considering that the man before him already had an inhuman number of issues stemming from the loss of his parents...

Harry sighed internally. 'Sod the secrecy act!' he finally decided. 'In for a penny, in for a pound!'

"All right," Harry conceded. "Take me to him and I'll see what I can do." Harry grabbed the chain of the hourglass with one hand while he still held the item itself with the other and headed towards the teleporter. After a few steps, however, he noticed that the other man was not following.

"Are you planning on programming this thing anytime soon?" Harry demanded. "You know, if you feel you need more time, I can always drop by later on horseback. It's up to you."

That seemed to get the man moving. A few seconds later found both men appearing in the depths of the Batman's lair. Harry followed the sprinting man through the maze of dimly lit machinery and up a treacherous set of stone stairs to arrive in the most palatial manor he had ever seen. Feeling just the slightest bit inadequate in the posh surrounding, Harry toyed with his tie as he dogged the other man's heels.

Two corridors and another staircase later, Harry found himself entering a room where three young people surrounded the bed of an old man. For a second, he just stood there observing the scene – yet another example of the closely-knit family that he himself had been denied. Dismissing the now familiar sense of bitterness at his own station in life, the wizard decided it was time to take action.

"Would you mind vacating the room for a few minutes? I'll need to concentrate," he requested as gently as he could.

"But... we can't..." the younger boy protested.

"Tim, come on!" Bruce ordered. "Barbara, Dick, I believe we'd better leave."

The group complied after sending a few strange looks towards both Batman and Harry.

When they left, Harry warded the room so as not to be disturbed and sifted his memories to recall everything Flamel had ever mentioned about preparing the tincture before setting to work. He used most of the ground stone to prepare the elixir, leaving just a tiny amount in the event of an emergency. If his calculations were correct, the potion should give the elderly man an additional fifteen years. Perhaps not much in respect to a wizard's lifetime, but Harry hoped that it would prove satisfactory to his elderly Muggle patient.

Finishing the distillation, Harry conjured a goblet and filled it with the ruby red concoction. Experimentally, he allowed a few drops to fall into the man's mouth. For a split second, nothing happened and

Harry felt a sinking feeling in his stomach. Then – fortunately - the man swallowed. Pulling the elderly butler to a half-sitting position, the wizard raised the goblet to the man's lips and emptied its contents. Banishing the used vessel, Harry laid the man back down and looked on as the Elixir of Life began to take effect.

While Harry was breaking the laws of physics – not to mention half a dozen Ministry edicts – in the bedroom, Batman was anxiously pacing in the adjacent hallway. His mind filling with the grim possibility of life without Alfred, the world's greatest detective could not help but question himself on whether consulting this... being was a mistake. After all, it was only a few short hours ago when he had staunchly opposed those believing in this Black's power and now... now, the great skeptic himself placed his adopted father's life into the magician's hands.

Surely, this was a sign of impending lunacy.

Yet... what choice did he have? Modern science, the oh-so-powerful force he had pledged his devotion to for innumerable years, had failed before they had even begun. As much as the scientist in him railed against the concept, the Wayne family scion could not help but acknowledge that this personage wielded an almost unholy amount of power. Moreover, all the Leaguers seemed convinced as to the man's identity. However, could this supposed 'Angel of Death' provide a miracle when none of his many resources could...?

A voice suddenly cut into his thoughts.

"So... who is this guy again?" his eldest adopted son, Dick Grayson, inquired.

Bruce looked at Dick speculatively for a moment before making a decision. "Perhaps it's better if you don't know."

"But who is he?" Dick pressed. "Is he some kind of League doctor?"

Bruce nearly bit his tongue.

Nearly. He was the Batman, after all.

"No, he most definitely isn't a doctor," the man responded in as even a tone as he could manage.

"Who is he then?" Barbara blurted, finally losing her patience.

"Let's just say that he's someone the doctor advised me to ask for help," Bruce dodged.

"The doctors said that nothing could be done," Tim piped up.

"The doctors believed that the only thing that could be done was impossible," Bruce corrected levelly before sighing audibly. "Let us pray that they were mistaken."

'I only hope that I wasn't fooled in my desperation,' Bruce added silently.

Just then, the door to the room opened again, rousing the group's attention. They were expecting the unidentified man in the suit, perhaps bearing news of an improvement in Alfred's condition. What they did not expect was to see one Alfred Pennyworth striding out of the room - unaided - while looking healthier than he had in years.

While the three young people crowded around him to express their happiness in his miraculous recovery, Bruce made his way to the lurking figure in the doorway.

"Approximately fifteen years," the wizard whispered. "That's all I could give him. I could calculate a more precise time, but I figured that it's better not to know sometimes."

"Thank you." It was plainly clear that the man had a hard time saying that.

Harry just looked over at the celebratory group. Smiling sadly at the huddle, the wizard dipped his head in reply and disappeared as silently as the Batman himself.

Reappearing outside on the well-kept lawn, Harry let his formal attire dissolve into his typical outdoor cloak and summoned his ghostly steed. "I think we should take a look at this 'Gotham City' while we're here, Mortis, just in case. Batman will be detained for a while longer," Harry said quietly as he mounted.

The stallion whinnied in response before taking to the skies, bearing his despondent burden towards the sprawling metroplex.

After the initial euphoria had died down, Dick's analytical mind realized that the man responsible for this wondrous change of affairs was not present. Since Bruce seemed content to stay within three feet of the distinguished gentleman's gentleman, Dick took it upon himself to thank their mysterious savior.

Hearing the sound of a nearby horse, he hurried down the stairs and flung open the doors. Instead of the loose equines he expected to find escaping from the stables, however, he froze solid at a completely unexpected sight.

Looking to the west, Dick Grayson could just barely make out the receding silhouette of their evening visitor, flying into the night sky astride a translucent stallion.

All of a sudden, the former acrobat felt very glad that Bruce's role as a playboy included maintaining the Wayne family's wine cellar.

"I... see," Amanda Waller replied dully after receiving the distressing news. "I'll take care of it, Sir."

"See that you do, Amanda," the President responded. "I don't have to tell you the devastation such a person could unleash if even half of these stories are true."

"I understand, Sir. I'll start on it immediately," the new female Secretary of the Department of Metahuman Affairs pledged.

"Good. Keep me informed." With that, the line went dead.

'Oh, boy!' the middle-aged woman groaned to herself. 'And I thought that rogue Ultimen were a headache!'

After the three young people had satisfied themselves that Alfred had indeed recovered, they finally went on their way – leaving Bruce and Alfred alone.

"Why didn't you tell us... tell me?" Bruce demanded.

"A gentleman does not discuss his ailments in public, Master Bruce," Alfred answered primly. "It is uncivilized."

Bruce was unable to accept such a defense and pressed the man further. "But we could have gotten you a doctor – the best that money can buy-"

"I had already seen the best doctors, thank you," Alfred stated firmly. "We are each appointed a time to live and a time to die. This was my time to die. However, I seem to be feeling spryer than I have in years and I have an odd notion that that you can explain why, Master Bruce."

"I consulted with your chief physician and he recommended a specialist. He, in turn, used an exotic treatment to heal you," Bruce answered as evenly as he could manage.

"Master Bruce," Alfred chastised, "I have known George Wellington for over forty years, and I have every confidence in his prognosis. MacGregor's Syndrome is terminal, and my case was rather severe. He assured me that there was no cure to be found anywhere. So I ask again – what did you do?"

"What I had to, Alfred," Bruce said darkly, the tones of the Bat creeping in slightly. "It was your earlier observation that gave me the idea, after all."

"I'll thank you not to take that tone with me, young man," Alfred said sharply. His frown grew even longer after he deciphered the other man's last statement. "And I sincerely hope that you are not alluding to that Mr. Black fellow."

"You were right, Alfred," Bruce said, not answering the older man's question directly. "He appears to be precisely who you and the League believed him to be. Those... doctors... were of the opinion that there was nothing to be done, so I got a second opinion. That is all."

Alfred shook his head at his charge. "Master Bruce, seeking a second opinion is one thing; striking a bargain with the Grim Reaper himself is quite another matter entirely!"

"What would you have me do, Alfred?" Bruce demanded. "Lose you as well? I have already buried two parents; I cannot stand the thought of burying a third! Modern medicine failed to cure you so I sought other means, and they worked. Your condition is completely healed and you now have a fifteen-year extension; the fact that I had to... entreat Death to do it is irrelevant."

"Oh, my dear boy," Alfred sighed softly before hugging the younger man he loved as a son. "There is no defeat in death, Master Bruce. Victory comes in defending what we know is right while we still live."

"I just can't accept that, Alfred, not if there is something that I can do about it," Bruce admitted.

"But at what cost, Master Bruce?" Alfred inquired. "I sincerely doubt that the Angel of Death accepts credit cards or cashier's checks."

"You are well, Alfred," Bruce stated again. "That is worth any price he could demand."

Bruce's pager chose that moment to sound its presence. Looking at the display, he read the notice of activity requiring his attention on the batcomputer. "Duty calls, old friend," Bruce informed the other man unnecessarily before escaping the embrace and heading for the secreted passageway behind the grandfather clock.

Bruce Wayne's life was – for the moment – stable. Unfortunately, the same could not be said for Batman's world.

Harry was flying over the sleeping city trying to sort out his thoughts. Though chiefly centered about Sirius – his own second father –, the wizard's mind soon drifted to another tormented man, one who was ready to sacrifice his pride to help his own second father. This topic, of course, led to further ruminations regarding an increasingly confusing subject: his own life and the sudden isolation he felt appear when the Doctor and Henchgirl had first theorized a hither-to unconsidered result of the prophecy regarding him and Voldemort. Not only was he a combination of at least three feared 'dark creatures' – unwittingly making him an immortal superhuman hybrid – but his slaying of the evil wizard bound to him by prophecy introduced a whole new factor into the equation.

The two women working away at Black Island had stumbled across an aspect of the prophecy that neither Harry nor Albus had considered completely by accident. Ultimately, it was the Doctor that theorized that – provided the prophecy was valid - if only Harry could destroy Voldemort, the opposite must also be true. Thus, it was that the young wizard learned from a subdued physician and inventor that the new 'lease on life' that he had won was potentially – a perpetual one.

Needless to say, this small but incontrovertible fact had tormented him ever since. He had several good examples proving that individuals with superhuman powers could still have lives outside of that role. Superman was an excellent example; he could throw on a pair of clear glasses and he was suddenly just one more member of the herd. If the rumors could be believed, he even managed a mostly successful relationship with a completely human reporter. Then, there was Diana, who was also immortal, if not invulnerable. According to the premiere gossiping news source known to the rest of the world as Kara Kent, the Amazon Princess had something of a hit-and-miss relationship with Dark Knight himself.

Harry felt a sudden urge to snort derisively. Even the usually emotionless and often fear-inducing Batman had managed to build a life for himself – even if he refused to acknowledge the fact. If such a social misfit as him could ignore the mortal/immortal divide, what did that mean for Harry's own desire for 'a normal life'?

Assuming that such a thing existed, of course.

As Mortis galloped aimlessly across the sky, Harry's mind returned – inevitably, it seemed of late – to a certain blonde powerhouse who shared a great many maladies with himself. She was the last of her kind as well – if you ignored Cadmus's little science project / attempt to play God, any way. Moreover, as his tempest psyche pointed out, her abilities set her apart from the crowd as well.

A sudden shrill scream caught his attention, forcing the thoughts of the appealing young woman into the rearmost recesses of his mind. Without prompting, Mortis had changed direction to intercept what appearing to be an insane clown holding a woman at gunpoint. Apparently, she had been out alone tonight and had the misfortune of being caught by this colorfully dressed figure. Next to the strangely clad man - who had just started laughing maniacally - was

a young woman dressed in a form-fitting jester's outfit, completely with face paint.

Since he figured that Batman and his 'family' was going to be busy this night with personal business, Harry decided to intervene. After all, he was already here.

"I strongly recommend that you let her go," Harry ordered from his saddle, choosing not to dismount once Mortis had landed.

"Who are you?" the green-haired man demanded. "You don't look like a Bat. Is ole Batsy branching out?"

"No. Batman and his apprentices are otherwise detained for the moment, so you'll have to make do with me. So, how about you let the woman go?" he repeated.

"Batsy's got more important things to do than come arrest me?" the man whined in a high-pitched voice that was quickly getting on Harry's nerves. "Ah, well!" he suddenly said cheerfully. "Maybe next time. Now, where were we?"

"You were about to let the woman go and pray for redemption of your soul," Harry supplied darkly.

"Well, since your volunteering... it may be even more fun to test it on you!" he said before bursting out in another peal of insane laughter.

Harry was beginning to understand why Batman was always in a rotten mood. The man's laugh was definitely starting to raise his ire. On the positive side, the clown duo was distracted enough to let the woman escape.

"Are you trying to threaten me?" Harry asked with mild interest.

The other figure placed his fist under his chin in the classic 'Thinker' pose. "Hmm... even better! I'm promising an evening of fun!" Lowering his hand, he added lowly, "For me, anyway."

Pointing the odd-shaped device at him, the clown asked, "Any last requests?"

"Odd," Harry said mildly, "normally I'm the one asking that question." The wizard looked intently at the other two for a few moments. "None? For either of you? Even better."

"You have to be Bat's buddy! He's not got a sense of humor, either," the man pouted. "You don't even know what fun is, do you?" he asked as he moved closer.

"Oh, I can appreciate a good joke just fine," Harry confided, "but this conversation is starting to get boring; we'll have to work on that..." Noticing the clown's hand slowly moving towards what was likely a weapon of some sort, Harry slid his wand into his hand and said, "For example... Acme!"

Whatever move Joker had planned, it never came to fruition as the unmistakable sound of a large falling object and the sight of swift moving shadows drew the clowns' attention to a rapidly approaching object from overhead. Apparently, the 'Clown prince of crime' could be greatly inconvenienced with a hundred pound anvil landing on his foot.

Who knew?

"Puddin'!" the woman cried as she rushed to the fallen man's side and helped shift the heavy weight off the criminal's foot.

The two costumed villains soon became aware of Harry's quiet laughter a few moments later. "Now, I would call that funny!" Harry finally said after watching the man in the purple coat dance around with his hands around the injured foot.

"Amateur!" the man said in a posh tone. "You obviously come from a line of sub-standard pranksters."

Harry's eyes narrowed and the Joker suddenly wondered if deliberately heckling someone who could pull anvils out of nowhere was such a brilliant idea after all. The answer to his inner ponderings soon arrived in the form of the chant, "Acme. Acme! ACME!"

"Was that enough of a prank for you?" Harry rhetorically asked the pile consisting of another anvil, a concert grand piano, and a tugboat. The only reply came in the form of a small white flag waved weakly

by a gloved hand extending from beneath the pile.

Sending a quick Reductor curse at the discarded purple weapon lying on the ground, Harry sketched a short bow at the wide-eyed – and unarmed – clown woman before guiding Mortis back to the sky. He felt satisfied at having ensured that at least one criminal in this city would not escape prosecution for his crimes.

After only a few moments into his flight, however, Harry found another incident requiring his intervention, this time in the form of a beautiful redheaded woman in a skin-tight green outfit. The femme fatale was apparently stalking an isolated man while attempting to kiss him. If the man's nervous backpedaling was any indication, he was not all that interested in her spirited approach.

Intrigued despite himself, Harry instructed Mortis to land. Dismounting, he approached the pair.

"You know," Harry offered helpfully, "he may be more inclined to reciprocate your feelings if you were a little less persistent."

The woman turned towards the new arrival and the man took the opportunity to escape.

"I could be wrong, of course," Harry offered as his senses picked up an odd scent coming from the slowly approaching female. Deciding to make certain of his suspicions, the wizard consciously sharpened his senses, unaware that his front incisors did the same.

"Hmm... dark and mysterious," the vixen said throatily as she continued glided in his direction. "Just my type."

Harry bit his lip, his confusion interrupted by the sudden stab of pain as he accidentally pierced his lip with his elongated fangs. Now sure that this woman was no creature of the night, the inter-dimensional traveler quickly willed his teeth back to their usual length.

"Well, handsome, I believe that you deserve a kiss..." the woman continued in a sultry tone.

Harry blinked at the forward woman. "You know, I believe that this approach is what scared him away. If you tried to be... uh... less

straightforward-" the woman got closer. "Uhm..., I really don't believe that this is a good idea..."

"I think it's perfect," she drawled as she drew close enough to run one hand down his chest.

"You don't understand," Harry pleaded. "I... uhm-" Any further protests were cut off as the woman rose up onto the balls of her feet and kissed him passionately.

As soon as the shock wore off, Harry backed off quickly. "Err... no offense, but I have to go now!" Suiting actions to words, he hurriedly jumped onto Mortis's back and flew away quickly, never once looking back at the Bellatrix-esque woman. Even Harry had his limits, and he was sure that some law enforcement official could help the woman – eventually.

He continued his frantic pace for the next several moments until yet another costumed individual drew his attention. A strange man, also dressed in green, was working over a suspicious package adjacent to a building's main entryway. Harry was not necessarily conversant in Muggle weaponry, but he suspected that the unidentified man was in the process of planting a bomb. Playing it safe around the unfamiliar device, Harry activated the electronic surveillance counter device in his coat and silently prodded Mortis lower to investigate.

"And who would you be?" he asked the man intently. Now that the wizard was closer, he could tell that the other man's green clothing was covered in black question marks. The loony spun around quickly and generally seemed startled by the sight of a stranger on a pale horse.

"Try to guess if you want to know. What they call me is what I am. And I am called what I represent. I'm a riddle myself."

Harry snorted ruefully. Apparently, there were more parallels between his world and this one than he initially suspected. The most interesting coincidence, however, was the apparent fact of the man seeming lack of magic. Perhaps not as great a threat as the felled Voldemort, but the risk was still there.

"While we're asking questions," Harry interrupted, "may I ask your views on homicide?"

"Oh, ho!" this world's Riddle exclaimed. "How did you come to know about my hobby?"

'Hmm... a Muggle Voldemort,' Harry groaned silently. 'Will I never escape his thrice damned influence?'

"All right, mate, what did the world ever do to you?" Harry demanded dully.

"They dared to spurn my genius!" the Riddler exclaimed while placing his fists on his hips. "They are unable to appreciate my intellectual superiority and-"

Harry would never get the rest of his explanation for, at that moment, the already activated bomb detonated, completely atomizing the green-clad figure and spraying Harry and Mortis with a fine coating of gore.

"Well, that didn't seem too intelligent," Harry noted as he cleaned his steed and himself of the mess. Mortis gave what Harry could almost believe was a groan – if he didn't know better – before he nudged the pooka again.

"Come on, Mortis," he encouraged. "I think we've helped Batman enough for one evening. It's past time we headed back to the Watchtower. Not even this loony city could contain any more individuals like that! Though," he pondered, "I'm beginning to understand why Batman's always in a bad mood."

"Commissioner Gordon?" the Batman asked from the shadows atop Police headquarters. In his usual fashion, the Caped Crusader had managed to scale the tall building and sneak to within ten feet of the aging police chief without detection.

"I was wondering if you'd show," Gordon said by way of greeting. "According to one of our new guests, you and your team were going to be busy tonight. You might remember her – Harley Quinn?"

"Indeed?" Batman inquired flatly. "Interesting source of information. Why do you believe her privy to my schedule?"

"Apparently, she was tipped off by one of your type, but I'll get to her in a minute," Gordon answered. "You wouldn't happen to know anyone who dresses in a black robe and has a flying ghost horse, do you?"

"And does he carry a giant scythe around as well?" the Batman demanded levelly.

"I wasn't joking!" Gordon said flatly.

"Neither was I," Batman answered in a similar tone. "I assume that he is why you called for me?"

"For one incident, anyway," Gordon admitted. "I don't have any witnesses for the others..."

"Others?" the world's greatest detective demanded.

"A few of the more... ironic crimes we've seen in a while," the commissioner answered as he threw a packet of photographs at the cowed figure. "Poison Ivy was found a few hours ago - poisoned. The toxin was apparently introduced orally, and in a concentration great enough to kill a herd of elephants. Several herds, actually. She's catatonic at the moment and the medics don't know whether she's gonna pull through."

"And then we have this little mess," the old man continued handing over another photograph. This latest image showed a gory sidewalk amidst evidence of a bomb blast. "You're looking at all that remains of the Riddler," Gordon supplied. "We know this from surveillance footage shot from across the street. In the middle of planting an explosive, Riddler appeared to turn around and start carrying on an animated conversation. He kept talking for the next few minutes until his explosive charge went off, consuming him in the blast."

Gordon grunted. "Strange thing is, the cameras didn't pick up a soul - other than Riddler himself. He must have finally flipped - carrying on conversations with himself."

"Anyway, that one is strange enough, but these next two..." More photographs were exchanged. "We also have a few more unexplainable accidents. After following up on a civil disturbance call, a couple of my boys found Scarecrow's remains - he accidentally

breathed a large dose of his own fear gas and died from a massive heart attack as a result."

"And to make it even more fun, at what we estimate to be the exact same time, there was another incident clear on the other side of town. Two-Face was driving away from a robbery when his car ran over an extremely low suspended cable. For currently unknown reasons, the stranded wire was suspended barely four feet off the ground when he drove through it; he was cut literally into two halves, along with his gang and their car.

"And for the piece de resistance, we have this mess," Gordon nearly groaned before passing the last picture. "Earlier tonight, Harley Quinn came running in downstairs in a panic and demanded protection. It seems that a cloaked assailant assaulted the Joker by hereto-unknown means; the clown is currently in Gotham General in Intensive Care. From the initial reports, every bone from the waist down was broken – any crime sprees he pulls from now on will be launched from a wheelchair."

Gordon shook his head disbelievingly. "I won't ever be able to look at the Roadrunner the same way again," he concluded.

Batman was momentarily struck speechless at the sheer audacity of what he was seeing.

"Is that a grand piano?" he finally demanded.

"Yes," Gordon answered tiredly. "Concert grand piano, to be exact. And just in case you're interested, I've already checked on those weights. They aren't produced anywhere in the known world. However, even if they were, they'd be hell to transport, even for Superman. Here's the transcript of what Harley told us, by the way," he finished while brandishing a folded wad of paper.

The Caped Crusader perused the document. "So..." he trailed off a few minutes later.

"I was hoping you could tell me more," the Commissioner confided. "Whoever the man is... he seems to know you."

"We've met," Bruce said shortly.

"So who is he?" Gordon queried anxiously. "Some sort of super assassin with a unique sense of humor?"

Batman felt the sudden urge to snort derisively, but withheld it at the last minute. "The world's foremost assassins could only dream of reaching his level."

"He's that dangerous?" Gordon asked wide-eyed.

"Extremely," the caped man confirmed. "However, his actions are not nearly as flamboyant as they were a few thousand years ago."

Gordon nearly choked on that bit of news. "I'm sorry," the aging police officer commented after checking his ears for obstructions. "Did you say a few thousand?"

"Correct," Batman said calmly, as if discussing immortal forces of nature were every day's business. 'Unfortunately,' he reviewed mentally, 'that assessment is not far off the mark.'

"W-who is he?" Gordon asked a few moments later. "I need some more information just to fill out all the paperwork your mysterious long-lived friend has so kindly generated for me."

Preparing to disembark, Batman said, "I suggest 'Death of natural causes'."

"And why is that?" the other man demanded crossly.

"Those criminals were eliminated by the Grim Reaper himself," Bruce answered resignedly. "It would be difficult to achieve a more natural death than that." A near silent discharge from his grapple gun whisked the Batman away, leaving the aging and now dumbfounded Police Commissioner standing atop the building alone.

The gray-haired official continued to stand on the windswept roof for several more minutes, until his unofficial ace-in-the-hole's final comment fully registered.

"My God!" Jim Gordon exclaimed softly. "Did the Batman just make a joke?"

Amanda Waller flashed her credentials to the gate guards before continuing her nocturnal journey to the Belle Reeve facility itself. The one-time presidential fallout shelter looked even less assuming in the black of night than during the waking hours; from the outside, it certainly did not resemble the sophisticated subterranean complex that it was in reality.

Exiting her vehicle, the Secretary of Meta-human Affairs followed the waiting aide through countless security checkpoints. Eventually, the duo reached an elaborate elevator still bearing the presidential seal. Showing proof of their identification and purpose of visit – again – to the pair of soldiers guarding the sole means of access to the facility, Amanda followed her escort inside the transport. A final swipe of the aide's security card sent the pair plummeting down to the depths of the installation.

After an exhilarating 1,500-foot drop, the silent assistant led Amanda through a series of concrete-and-steel blast doors – more leftovers of the facility's former purpose. Finally, the short Director found herself facing a final vault door with a combination handprint-retinal scanner. While waiting for the aide to open this latest barrier, Amanda amused herself by reading the various warnings about what lay beyond the door.

"This is it, Madame Secretary," the male attendant confirmed. She heard the loud click of locks disengaging before the steel behemoths slowly ground apart to reveal a small block of prison cells, only one of which was currently inhabited. Leaving the attendant standing outside, Amanda strode to the red-lit dormitory. Clearing her throat, the short Director roused the lone occupant's attention.

"Hello, Galatea," Amanda Waller greeted. "How would you like an early parole?"

Allowing Mortis to return to... wherever pookas went to graze when wizards were not riding them, Harry Apparated back to the Watchtower. Almost instantly upon his return, the depressing thoughts that had settled down during the flight returned with a vengeance.

Having no other items on his agenda for the evening, Harry decided to scavenge the cafeteria for coffee in hopes that the miracle beverage could ward off the troublesome thoughts. Unfortunately for

the wizard, the commissary was deserted of both occupants and coffee. Before he could launch into a fresh tirade against the individuals responsible for replacing the foodstuffs, he was accosted by a passing Wonder Woman.

"Still out of coffee?" she asked impishly. Sensing Harry's rather grim mood, her playful streak rapidly withered. "Did something happen?" she asked anxiously.

"No, not exactly," Harry assured her. "It's just that I helped someone earlier this evening and it stirred up some old ghosts I thought had already been put to rest."

Diana looked curious. "How can helping someone remind you of bad things?"

"I'm not sure if I should be the one to tell you," the wizard answered after a moment. "It's rather personal for Batman. You'll have to ask him for the details."

Mentally snorting at the likelihood of Batman ever volunteering personal information, Diana redirected her inquiry. "Are you going to be alright?"

Harry smiled slightly. "I'll be fine." After a few moments, he added softly, "I always am."

"Can I help?" the Amazon asked honestly.

This time the wizard's smile was more genuine. "No, but I appreciate your offer nonetheless. I think that I'll just hole up in one of your viewing decks for a while. Have a good evening, Diana."

Nodding to the immortal female warrior, Harry Apparated to the uppermost viewing lounge where he found himself once more alone with his thoughts.

Superman was concerned.

This was nothing new, as the Man of Steel was known to watch over the planet. He was both an advocate and an advisor, leaving him privy to more secrets both on and off the planet than most people suspected. Not to mention his being - in secret - a reporter who

followed the old rules of 'report the story, don't be the story'. In other words, he was a worrywart who did the right thing for the right reasons instead of doing it the easy way.

Right now, he was worried about his little cousin Kara who, he felt, was too young to be a hero, much too young to start dating, and definitely not ready for her first beau to be the living incarnation of Death. If he had his way, his adopted little sister/cousin would not date until he was long dead, buried, and forgotten. By his best estimates, Kara should be mature enough to handle a relationship by the 30th century.

Thinking back to some of the mischief he had overheard his 'parents' discussing when they spoke of the girl's attempts at blending in with the humans, Clark revised that estimate to the 40th century – just to be safe.

To that end, he was combing the Watchtower in an attempt to find the mysterious Mr. Black, said incarnation of Death itself. Diana had tipped him off earlier that she had spotted the strange man on his return from Batman's summons heading towards the upper decks. The Amazon had also mentioned that he seemed to be saddened by something, but had no indication as to what the trouble was.

Clark finally caught up with the supposed wizard in a small observation deck. The person in question was wearing his traditional pair of jeans, a t-shirt with a skull on it, and his ever-present jacket, all the while casually lounging in a lawn chair. To the Kryptonian's growing unease, the figure happened to be idly playing with his scythe while gazing at the planet beneath them. To finish off this increasingly sinister scene, a small table supporting what looked like alcohol accompanied the chair. This alcohol, however, had fire winding its way through the glass with brief bursts of flames occasionally bubbling to the top.

Clark ignored the feeling of dread that permeated the room and went up to the man. Given that the other man had the scythe out and that the face reflected in the window was pensive, Clark decided that he should keep this discussion low-key, at least for now. If worse turned to worst, he could up the ante later. "Mr. Black?"

Harry looked up at the interruption in surprise before conjuring a chair for the blue-clad hero. "Is there a mission, Superman?"

Clark shook his head and took the offered seat. "No, I just wanted to speak with you privately. We haven't really had the chance to sit down and just talk, what with all the crises here of late."

Harry nodded, his scythe melting back into its sword form before returning to his bottomless pocket. "True enough," the wizard agreed. "It would be good to talk. I don't get a chance to do that too often."

Despite the misconception people held of him as all brawn and no brain - especially when compared to Batman - Superman was not stupid. Headstrong? Certainly. Impulsive? Definitely. But never stupid.

"You looked like you had the cares of the world on your shoulders," the caped man noted. "And I can tell you from experience that that never ends well. Want to talk about it?"

Harry chuckled grimly. "Oh... I was just polishing my scythe while wandering down memory lane – it wasn't a pleasant journey and most of my recollections I would prefer not to remember. Feeling regret for all those people who couldn't be saved despite my best efforts are probably the worst to recall, however. The truly sad thing is that most of their deaths were so pointless, merely products of their own corrupt governments."

The wizard shook his head. "It's unreal how much damage a few power hungry politicians can unleash if given the chance. The people should not fear their governments; the governments should fear their people."

"I know what you mean," Clark sighed as he uneasily accepted the... drink... that the other man offered him. "There are just some things that we can't interfere with, no matter how powerful we may be."

"Too true!" Harry answered sadly. "There was one political leader in England that I had the misfortune to know, and he felt that his constituents should bow to him, instead of ensuring that they were not endangered. He even went so far as to persecute all of those who disagreed with him. He was removed from office in disgrace at the end, but not before he caused irreparable harm. He died shortly

thereafter... apparently, the idiot mistook an extremely acidic poison for beer and killed his fool self. That is an old regret of mine, by the way. If I could have, I would rather have had him alive to face the results of his own misdeeds but... It was his time to die."

Superman raised an eyebrow. The mercenary that was Mr. Black seemed to possess as cold and unforgiving a sense of justice as the Batman himself. "So... you dislike killing people?"

"To be perfectly honest with you, I am disgusted with killing people. Unfortunately, it seems to be my curse to be very talented at the craft. I have come to realize that there are times when death is the only solution," Harry mused. "Certainly, other avenues should be explored first if they exist, but there are many souls who follow the path of evil so completely that their destruction becomes the only option."

Harry downed a good portion of his own beverage as he observed the other man's reaction to his tale. Not seeing the revulsion he half-expected the 'boy scout' to exhibit, the wizard continued. "The hypocrisy is not easy to bear, knowing that you must kill certain people so that others may live. It sets you apart from people... apart from the world and everything in it. You end up not having a home; you are forever denied rest. Ultimately, the self-disgust follows you everywhere as a constant reminder that you are isolated – a wolf among sheep, as it was."

Harry then set his cup down and met the other man's gaze. "What's even worse is how other people begin to treat you. I've been lucky enough to make a few true friends over the years, but they are very rare. As for the rest... some openly revile you as the monster you really are while others are exceedingly polite in their dealings with you – all the while praying that they escape from you unscathed."

The wizard smiled sadly. "Sort of like what you're doing right now," he said bluntly. At Superman's sharp look, Harry cracked a slight grin. "I can sort of... smell others' fear... among other things. It's something of a gift." The grin left his face. "I've been meaning to thank you all for the effort, however. To be perfectly honest, I can barely remember a time when people didn't fear me to some extent." He snorted before murmuring, "No doubt even someone as understanding as Kara would flee if she truly knew what a monster I could be."

The blue-clad figure across the table gave a nearly imperceptible twinge, but Harry's thrice-enhanced senses noticed the motion nonetheless. Understanding its cause almost instantly, he quickly added, "I enjoy my time with your cousin – I can't tell you how pleasant it is to be treated as a person rather than a dangerous viper that may strike at any moment. However, I also know that she will eventually realize exactly who – and what – I am and this respite will end. Until then, however, you have my solemn vow that no harm shall befall her if it is within my power to prevent it. You have my word of honor on it."

Clark Kent blinked repeatedly, floored by what had just been shared with him. He had envisioned many outcomes of this inevitable conversation – few ended peaceably – but never had he really considered the topic from any point of view but his cousin's or his own. In fact, Mr. Black's oration struck several uncomfortable chords with his own tenuous relationship with the entirely human Lois Lane. Granted, the scale was entirely different, but the Kryptonian still feared that the accident-prone reporter would suddenly realize that she was flirting with an alien far different from herself and call things off. In fact, he was still amazed that the woman had taken his dual nature as well as she had. Of course, he now served as the woman's chief means of transportation and errand boy, but still...

Forcing his mind back on track, he tackled the problem as logically as he could. The knowledge that the little blonde girl he had watched over for so many years had succeeded in making such a feared entity more personable filled him with pride. His instincts, however, still urged him to fly the girl to the farthest reaches of known space and pray that this menace in human guise could not follow after them. This latest information, however, forced him to re-evaluate his position.

Superman frowned and took a sip of the drink to gather his thoughts. He reluctantly admitted that Kara's feelings seemed genuine; at least, he had been unable to find any evidence of tampering or manipulation. Moreover, it appeared that Mr. Black's intentions towards her were equally honorable. If Diana's information regarding the nature of oaths given by magical beings was to be believed, Kara had just gained the penultimate guardian angel. Oddly enough, Clark somehow just knew that the offer was legitimate and well within this... person's power to grant.

Considering all of this information, Clark used both his head and his heart to arrive at a decision.

"Kara is one of the people closest to my heart," the Man of Steel announced. As the other man nodded and seemed to close further into himself, Clark added, "I'll hold you to your promise and... I wish the two of you the best of luck."

The invulnerable superhuman felt as if his side would burst from holding in the laughter the other man's dumbfounded expression generated. Apparently, omniscience was not one of Death's many powers.

"Thank you," his fellow Leaguer got out when he composed himself a few moments later.

Clark nodded and dropped the topic. Choosing a more light-hearted point of conversation, he nodded towards the impressive view port and mentioned, "So, I see you found my favorite method of unwinding. Have you tried any other means of getting your mind off things?"

Harry dipped his head. "I go on vacation. I've always been fascinated to learn about new cultures. In fact, if I could have a normal occupation, I would choose to be an archaeologist. While I'm 'out and about', I try to help out where I can, but it doesn't always work out exactly as I intend."

The Man of Steel also did not miss how this admission oddly coincided with a conversation he had with Kara some years prior regarding her future career. "Believe it or not," Clark mentioned, "Kara has expressed similar interests."

Harry looked interested. "Really?" he asked. "I'll have to remember that. Exploring really is interesting."

When no further comments seemed to be forthcoming, the inquisitive reporter pressed, "And how, exactly, do things not 'work out' when you're vacationing?"

His query was greeted with laughter. "Well," the mage deliberated, "there was this one little misadventure that popped up on the last

uninterrupted vacation I took. I started out in Greece and everything was going alright – at least, at first. See, there was this girl - Helen I think her name was - who started the whole thing. I was in a bar, sipping some freshly made Ouzo - which, by the way, is the best way to drink it – and minding my own business when she came in. At first, I thought nothing of it, but she started flirting with everyone there. Any way, she eventually latched onto me and - when she discovered who I was - she refused to leave me alone."

The wizard made an indecipherable gesture with one hand. "When I was ready to leave and she still wouldn't turn loose, I offered to get her a little something and meet up with her again later. You should have seen her face light up; it was as if she won a prize or something. That did the trick, though, and I managed to get out of the bar without anything more happening. Now, I always keep my word, but I really wanted avoid this particular promise for a while. Unfortunately, Henchgirl disagreed and the Professor wanted to do something right then and there. It was about then when the Doctor mentioned that she wanted to visit Santa Claus. Since I couldn't get any decisions from the others, we tagged along with her."

"Wait a minute," Clark interrupted. "You mean that you actually visited Santa Claus?"

"Yes..." Harry said questioningly. When the other man did nothing more than blink owlishly, the wizard continued. "Anyway, I went along for the ride and ended up visiting the most charming village I have ever seen. You wouldn't believe how many elves live there - more than I have ever seem in my life - and all of them doting and kind. They showed me a quaint workshop where the Professor and Henchgirl were overjoyed with all of the equipment available. We ended spending more time there than I expected, which was the start of my next batch of troubles."

Harry chuckled embarrassedly. "You see, at the time, I was not that good with potions. I'm still not, to be perfectly honest. Anyway, to make matters worse, the other people - and especially the elves - expected me to be some sort of potions' master. Reputations can be very unhelpful in certain instances, let me tell you. At any rate, they gave me a bench and some ingredients to work with; I gave it my best shot and tried for something easy. I had decided that I would try to make a simple drink cocktail using Fire Whiskey and some local ingredients. Unfortunately, there was an explosion not two minutes

later. No one was injured – thankfully - but having an entire building come raining down around you in flaming bits is never a good thing. As things turned out, the fact that the workshop was next to a stable wasn't very fortuitous either. You wouldn't believe how flammable frozen straw can be..."

"You- you burned Santa Claus out of business?" Superman demanded disbelievingly.

"Not completely!" Harry answered immediately. A thoughtful expression crossed his face for a second before he grudgingly admitted, "Well, I suppose that I technically did, now that you mention it – but I put it back to rights! Granted, the old owner was pretty mad - especially about this flying sled he only used once a year that was stored in the stable - but the Professor and Henchgirl only took about a week to create a new one. You'd think the fact that the new one is even faster than the original would please him, but he was still angry!"

Harry shrugged and continued in a lower tone. "As I recall, the elves weren't exactly pleased either, and I spent that week looking around corners to avoid being pelted with coal – the little buggers had unfortunately taken to carrying around large pails full of the stuff and throwing it at me."

"But... you burned down Santa Claus!" Clark persisted.

"It was an accident!" Harry muttered irritably. "Anyway," he said in a more normal tone, "we decided to make a quick getaway and ended up in Hell. I would recommend against your going there; it's far from any of the nicer places I've visited and the shops were too expensive to get anything. I swear, they were charging an arm and a leg for their merchandise, if not out-and-out demanding your soul. Granted, they do have a rather high tourist industry but I was not impressed. I was even less amused with the weather there – it's always overcast, humid, and they have the largest assortment of blood suckers that I've ever seen. Considering that I'm good friends with a vampire count in Transylvania, that's saying something!"

"Anyway, after the Doctor treated a few people - for what ailment, I could not say - we went to a little place called Troy. My usual luck held up and we ran into Helen again, who was wondering if I had gotten her that gift yet. To make matters even more interesting, she

managed to get me caught in the middle of a rather nasty domestic dispute. You see, she had left her former husband and remarried, fleeing to her new lover's home in Troy. The jilted hubby didn't care for this notion very much and had followed after her. When he and his friends caught up to Helen and her new hosts, the fur really started to fly. At her pleading, I tried to play mediator, but – unfortunately – both of the guys involved thought that they were better for the girl than the other and gathered large numbers of friends to defend their claims."

Clark could feel the now familiar headache coming on again. Curiously, the sensation seemed to appear whenever Mr. Black began reminiscing. Attempting to make conversation, he noted, "I suppose the fighting got pretty messy, then?"

"Boy, did it ever!" Harry snorted. "The fighting eventually took to the streets and ended up wrecking the entire city! Things got so bad that even the authorities got in on the act instead of helping to settle things between the two instigators. Before anyone knew it, all-out war had broken out between the two factions. What should have been a simple issue to discuss instead took a long time to resolve, and the entire town was lost as a result. I finally washed my hands of the mess; I gave Helen a book on poetry that I had picked up and then I left in disgust."

"Well, I hope that things worked out for her," Clark finally said after a few moments.

"I suppose they did," Harry replied. "I heard through the grape vine that she and her new beau survived the impromptu war, for whatever that's worth."

The wizard shrugged. "As I said, I pretty much put her out of my mind after that. On the bright side, I met another person at Troy. Uly was nearly as disgusted with the state of things as I, so I bid my friends farewell and the two of us left. In hindsight, that was one of my poorer decisions." Harry shook his head and chuckled briefly. "I swear, that boy was born under an unlucky star. You wouldn't believe the messes he somehow landed us in on our way back to his home in Greece. First, he decided that he wanted to sail back, so we got a boat and went on our way. Unfortunately, he had to be the single worst navigator that I have ever met; it was almost like he wanted to get lost!"

Clark tried to withhold comment, but his childhood fascination with the Odyssey caused one question slipped out regardless. "I don't suppose that 'Ully' stood for 'Ulysses', did it?"

Harry searched through his memories for a moment. "I think that it did, now that you mention it," he said idly. Ignoring the curious noise issuing from his companion, the wizard continued, "In any case, we finally got back to Greece after several mishaps, and I took the opportunity to say goodbye. I decided that I had enough excitement for one trip and headed on back home."

"Long story short," Harry finished, "never get involved with an exceptionally pretty girl with unresolved issues - they seem to cause nothing but trouble."

Superman looked at the man beside him and barely kept from gaping. It was rare that you heard a story like this, and even more rare when it came from a person who was there. He could not help but wonder what other 'tall tales' this man had witnessed firsthand. Drinking the rest of the whiskey, he got up. "Well, I've got to get back on duty now. If you should ever feel troubled or just need to talk to someone, feel free to look me up. This has been very... enlightening."

"Thanks," Harry replied, touched at this show of kindness. "I'll remember that."

Looking at his watch, Harry noticed the time. "I suppose that I should call it quits as well. It's getting late, and I have some information I wanted to review before knocking it off for the evening."

As Harry was leaving, Clark called back to him. "Aren't you going to take your drink?"

Harry turned around. "You keep it. I have plenty more," he said while patting his coat. "Besides, you seem to enjoy the taste."

Clark watched as Harry left through the door – again ignoring the simple fact that it was shut. He had to admit - if only to himself - that he did like the taste of this... fire whiskey. It was another fact that few would believe when regarding the league's 'Boy Scout', but he did enjoy the occasional glass of wine. Never to excess, of course.

He was Superman, after all.

Leaving the Commissioner, Batman returned to the latest incarnation of the Batmobile and set it to return him immediately to the Cave. It appeared that his work in Gotham was done for the night – for the next several nights, actually – and he needed the solitude to contemplate this new conundrum.

His mood was not helped in the slightest at the upcoming 'I told you so' look that his father-cum-butler was sure to level at him.

Finally arriving at the Cave, the Caped Crusader exited his vehicle and immediately noticed the silhouette of his recently healed butler standing aside the giant Batcomputer - as was his custom.

"Back so soon, Sir?" Alfred asked as his employer strode to his usual seat, sweeping the black cape aside in the process. "The Commissioner's concerns must have been exceptionally brief."

"One could say that," Bruce replied as he removed the cowl from his head. "Gordon wanted to inform me that Gotham's sordid nightlife had an unpleasant run-in with our last houseguest."

"Really?" Alfred asked in an interested manner. "How so?"

The billionaire scion of the Wayne family relayed Gordon's information to the elderly man. When he finished, Bruce leaned back in his seat and asked, "Any suggestions?"

"Well, apparently Death has gained a sense of humor," the Englishman noted. "Every single at-large villain was soundly trounced in a manner reminiscent of their own murderous crime sprees."

"Except Quinn, Cobblepot, and Selena," Bruce replied.

"Miss Quinn is hardly a danger of the likes of Poison Ivy, Master Bruce," Alfred mentioned, "and perhaps Miss Selena was spared due to her more heroic exploits. The Penguin, as shady as he seems, appears to be making an honest living for once. I would hazard that that is why he was left unmolested."

"Perhaps," Bruce allowed, "but I am still at a loss as to how to respond to this situation."

"I think it best to simply let it go, Sir," the gentleman's gentleman suggested. "Our Mr. Black went to some lengths to avoid leaving any evidence of his involvement - if what you say of the Riddler's untimely end is accurate. Pressing the issue further can only earn his ire, and I find myself unable to feel remorseful that such villainous individuals are no longer among us."

"That may be so," the Batman allowed, "but he still broke the law and circumvented justice."

Alfred just looked at the younger man in askance. "Do many people not say the same of the Batman, who wages a vigilante crusade against the criminal element? You operate by your own rules, which frequently conflict with the written law."

He gestured at the city off in the distance. "This situation is no different. I have always believed, Master Bruce, that there are certain forces that affect our lives that are completely beyond man's control or comprehension. Women are one such element," he said with a slight smile, "and the powers of Heaven and Hell are another. We know that they exist, we can see evidence of them in our lives, but we rarely understand the reasons why they act as they do."

Bruce looked thoughtful for a few moments. "Perhaps you have a point," he finally acknowledged before turning to the computer console and updating his records, the topic of conversation now closed.

Alfred, picking up on his employer's not-so-subtle clue, turned around and began the journey back to the manor house above the cavern. While it remained unsaid, both he and Bruce realized that the entire ordeal was likely the repayment for Death's services on his behalf earlier that evening. As his more energetic frame continued his ascension up the stone stairway, the butler could not help but wonder – despite his comments to his charge - if they would come to regret their bargain.

An hour later – or two thousand, seven hundred and thirty nine hours if you were a certain wizard -, Harry finished reviewing the entire League database pertaining to their foes. Muttering to himself,

he shook his head at the sheer number of intergalactic criminals the League had encountered during their short time of operation.

And Henggirl called him a trouble magnet?

The passing thought of his creative friend reminded him that he had not heard from anyone on Black Island since his discovery in Zatanna's dressing room. Removing his Zippo from the confines of his voluminous coat, Harry spun the wheel and called out his friend's name.

"Hello, this is Henggirl," a youthful female spoke.

"Hey, Henggirl!" Harry greeted. "I hadn't heard from you in a while and thought that I'd check in. How is everyone?"

"As well as can be expected, considering," she replied.

Harry felt a sense of worry overcome him. "Considering?" he prompted in a calm voice.

"There was a slight... miscommunication regarding the repairs to the new PortTrans system," the inventor answered reluctantly.

"And what form did this error take?" the wizard queried, manner still outwardly composed.

"It's a funny story," the woman replied quickly, "sort of. You see, the Professor was able to salvage most of the old machine and was nearly finished repairing it when the Architect... broke it." The last statement came out in a rush, but Harry managed to catch the general idea.

"He did what?" Harry asked levelly.

"It was an honest mistake, really," Henggirl pleaded. "He was working on a new type of warding to block those pesky drunk Australian boaters and accidentally sent one of the new warding monoliths crashing through the lab ceiling."

"I see," he answered a few moments later. "I hope that everyone was unharmed."

"Oh, we're all fine, but I'm afraid that the transporter is a total loss," Henggirl confided disappointedly. "The Professor has already begun making a new model, but it may take some time before it is ready."

"That's alright," Harry reassured the distraught young woman. "I've found several things to occupy my time here; I'll be fine. Have you made any headway on expanding this inter-dimensional connection we have?"

"Actually, I have," she answered in a much lighter tone. "We should be able to send inanimate matter through the floo connection without a problem now. As you know, we still can't use it to bring you home, but at least we can send you supplies now."

"That's good news!" Harry encouraged the inventor. "There's a young witch here who is in desperate need of some decent self-study spell books. Do you happen to have anything along those lines?"

"I believe I do," she said after a few moments' thought. "Any particular subject?"

"Just general topics for now; she's doing well for a self-taught witch, but her theory could use some help."

"I've got just the thing!" Henggirl replied happily. "Heads up!"

Harry quickly pointed the Zippo away from him just in time to avoid a series of books as they flew out of the tiny green flame.

"Got 'em!" Harry confirmed after a few moments passed without any new projectiles emerging.

He could just barely hear the woman doing a victory cheer in the background. "Great! Those are pretty self explanatory, so she should be set."

"Excellent!" Harry praised. "I appreciate it."

"Not a problem," she replied happily, before adding, "And I've got a couple more things for you, too."

"Really?" the wizard inquired.

"Yep!" Henchgirl confirmed. "The first is a new toy from the Professor. It's been lying around for a while now but he's never found much of a use for it. He called it a Universal Remote Control."

"Oh, you mean for controlling televisions and VCRs and the like, right?" Harry questioned.

The witch paused for a moment before replying with confusion thick in her voice, "No, the Professor said he made it to remote control the universe."

Harry could feel his jaw sagging. "Come again?"

"He said it's a combination of your watch's temporal abilities and the Hex quarter's analyzing capabilities," she explained. "It's supposed to let you rewind and fast forward time, and it's got menus to explain pretty much anything."

"Any bugs I need to watch out for?" Harry finally asked in as normal a tone he could manage.

"No," she said cheerfully, "apparently he already tweaked it." She then muttered something along the lines of, "though what use a Muggle architect could be, I have no idea..."

"Okie dokee!" Harry said quickly. "If you're sure about it, I'll give it a go."

"Great!" she exclaimed. "Here it comes!" An instant later, a blue and gray object shot out of the lighter. Fortunately for the device, however, Harry's Seeker reflexes were up to the job.

"Cool!" he admitted as he turned the odd remote over in his hands. "I'll let you know how it works out," he promised.

"Thanks a lot," she called back. "Now, I have a new spell I just finished that might come in handy," the witch mentioned.

"Oh?" the inquisitive wizard prodded. "What does it do?"

"It's a silent and wandless flight charm," the woman answered proudly. "The incantation is 'Protego Leviosa' and it surrounds you in the traditional Protego shield. The difference is that my spell allows you to shape the shield in whatever manner you desire and then levitate the shield in whatever direction you want. The harder you concentrate, the faster you go."

Harry just blinked dumbly at the apparent duplication of Green Lantern's signature method of transportation. "Yes," he said a little distractedly, "I believe that your spell will prove most useful!"

"You mean it?" she asked in a little girl voice. "The Professor thought that it was a waste of time when we already have brooms and the like, but still..."

"No, I thank you for sharing it," the wizard replied quickly, silently vowing to practice this new spell as soon as possible.

"You're welcome!" she answered. "I'll let you go; I hear the Professor bellowing something about Goblin pies..."

Harry chuckled at the antics that so commonly infested his island retreat. "Well, good luck sorting them out," Harry pledged. "If you need something to distract the Architect with, ask him if he's ever considered building a space station. I'm staying on one right now and the view is truly spectacular."

"I will," the witch promised. "Until next time, Mr. Black."

"Good night, Henchgirl," Harry returned before the connection went dead. Falling into a nearby recliner, the wizard once more found his attention drifting to the 'Universal Remote'. While the general concept barely phased him after his long exposure to the inventive duo, there was one thing that confused him regarding the device.

What did the power button do?

A/N: Well, this concludes Chapter Five of Terminal Justice. It's been a long time coming, and I hope you found it entertaining.

On the list of congratulations, kudos go to Chris for the title. I would also like to thank James and Patrick for their assistance with proofreading this chapter. Finally, thanks go out to all of you who

contributed the inspiring drabbles and other suggestions that I incorporated into this chapter (such as the Desperate Measures scene submitted by Luinlothana or Hitomi's version of Superman and Harry's little chat). Additionally, I wish to confess that I borrowed certain references/plot devices from two motion pictures (Click! and Meet Joe Black) besides the obvious borrowed conversation between Alfred and Bruce from Batman & Robin.

I hope you found this latest submission to be worth the wait, and I await your reviews/suggestions/etc.

Previous Chapter
Terminal Justice

Chapter 5: An Unusually Powerful Wizard By Any Other Name...
by Overkill

Next Chapter

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Chapter 6: So, Who Is He, Really?

by Overkill

Next Chapter

Disclaimer: This is a cross between JLA (Season 5) and Rorschach's Blot's Make A Wish Story. Harry Potter is owned by JK Rowling and various publishers. Henchgirl, The Professor, and other such objects are Rorschach's creation. DC Comics own the Justice League and associated characters/plot devices. The lack of plot, however, can be attributed to me.

So, Who Is He, Really?

At the start of their shift, the Dark Knight sought out the puzzling Mr. Black who - much to Bruce's private horror - appeared to have developed a taste for engineering. At least, that was the only logical explanation for finding the man energetically pestering the docking bay's technicians for details on how the landing area could be pressurized and left open to space at the same time.

Interrupting the impromptu lecture on electromagnetic fields, Batman did his accustomed appearing act right behind the other man. He was just preparing to speak up when - without looking around - he heard, "Good afternoon, Batman. You don't happen to know anything about this electrical field stuff, do you?"

Wondering what genetic trait granted black-clad males with a penchant for British slang their preternatural ability to know exactly where he was, Batman instead answered, "You have more important things to occupy your time. Come with me."

Shrugging, Harry bid the attendants goodbye and followed the other man to one of the space station's workrooms. Upon entering, Harry noticed that both Superman and Wonder Woman already occupied the small conference room.

Before he could inquire further, Batman explained with a terse, "You'll be working with us today."

Harry shrugged lightly and greeted the other two heroes. "Fair enough," the wizard answered amicably. "What are we doing?"

"Until a mission becomes available, reviewing reports," the cowed man answered as he sat himself in front of a computer console.

"Any ideas on how long that will take?" Harry asked politely.

"An hour," Batman grunted. "Maybe two."

Harry just nodded, mentally sighing at the lack of things to do in the dreary space – the room didn't even have a clock, for heaven's sake! Resolving to keep himself occupied in the interim due to his unfamiliarity with the Watchtower's computer systems, Harry fished out one of the more promising books from Henchgirl's collection – *So You Want To Be An Animagus?* - and settled back in his chair.

The elderly sensei roused himself from his half-trance. A furtive sweep of his aged eyes confirmed what his other senses had already reported. None of his brother monks had disturbed his meditations within the temple's inner sanctum – at first glance, the shrine was populated solely by himself and the plethora of requisite candles. And yet, he definitely detected an unexpected intrusion.

Bowing his head again, the aged monk calmly stated, "I know you are here, Boston Brand."

As if his words were a summoning incantation, a pale specter appeared from the golden statue in front of him. "What's the point of bein' a flippin' ghost if you can't even sneak up on people?" the now visible spirit demanded. Not waiting for the living – and still seated – monk to answer, Boston added, "For that matter, what's the point of me bein' a ghost period? It's been a year since I caught the man who murdered me."

The Master slowly turned his head and looked at the vexed ghost. "So," he finally said, "your work here is done. You are ready to pass on to the next level."

"I don't know what 'ready' means," the ghost confessed, "but I feel like I've done my time."

Dipping his head again, the venerable monk noted, "And yet, here you are..."

"Here you are'?" Boston repeated disbelievingly. "What kind of lousy wisdom is 'here you are'?"

"If you seek knowledge, you have but to ask," the Master offered sedately.

"I've avenged my own death," the spirit exclaimed resignedly, "so why am I still here?"

With his eyes still closed, the elderly cleric replied, "Your destiny is not to avenge your own death. Your destiny is to avenge mine."

"What?" the ghost demanded bewilderedly.

Outside of the monastery's walls, a sudden flash of intense light drew the attention of the sentry. Drawing his fur coat together in a vain attempt to retain a little more body heat, the freezing monk stepped forward as the light coalesced into a portal of some kind and began disgorging several strangers.

"This humble one begs your forgiveness," the monk addressed the apparent leader of the party, "but to enter this sacred place, the right must be earned." Having given the customary challenge, the rather muscular cleric drew a wicked-looking broadsword.

Devil Ray, who was the first to appear, raised one forearm and quickly dispatched the challenger with two swift darts. Walking past the already cooling corpse, the costumed villain chuckled and mockingly replied, "Keep the change."

The group made their way up the wintry path until they came upon a pair of locked wooden gates, which Rampage quickly removed. With the obstruction cleared, Lex Luthor took the lead and strode confidently towards the ornate temple in the center of the compound. His progress was interrupted, however, as one of the smaller resident monks deliberately stood in his path.

"This humble one begs your forgiveness," the slight figure offered with a bow, "but no outsider is permitted in the Temple of Nanga Parbat."

Exchanging glances amongst themselves, Atomic Skull took the initiative and marched up so that he towered over the adolescent

cleric. "That's cute, kid," the villain growled, "now get out of the way or I'll spank you." The man with the flaming skull launched a haymaker at the much shorter figure – only to have his fist grabbed easily by one of the robed child's hands.

"This would also not be permitted," the young monk offered with the slightest of smiles. The villain attempted to punch the offensive individual again with even worse results – the cleric twisted into a full back flip and judiciously introduced one booted foot into Atomic Skull's jaw. While the man was still in the air, the boy elbowed the bigger figure in the midriff and sent the criminal flying across the compound.

Chuckling at the display, Devil Ray observed as the Skull unsteadily climbed back to his feet, "Looks like little Bruce Lee's got your number. Lucky thing you've got us for backup."

"This humble one would not presume to fight you alone," the monk replied, before over two scores of his fellows appeared to help repel the invaders.

Rampage smiled darkly. "Now things are getting interesting....," she noted.

"Take them down!" Lex Luthor ordered his companions. The other villains were very happy to oblige and, between the efforts of the various metahumans and the human shock troops, the skilled martial artists were quickly being overrun.

Taking a moment to revel in the chaos, the bald master criminal finally resumed his earlier journey, only to be interrupted once more. This time, however, the interruption came in the form of the elderly sensei standing in the doorway to the temple.

"Stand aside or you're dead!" Devil Ray threatened.

Leaning his weight upon his accompanying staff, the Master replied, "In the fullness of time, we are all dead."

Not appreciating the old man's rebuttal, the masked criminal proceeded to fire several poison darts at the obstruction. Miraculously, however, not a single dart connected. Whirling his staff as if he were much younger, the elderly cleric caught each projectile

in the polished wood of his walking stick. After several failed attempts, Devil Ray stopped his actions in bewilderment.

"This is not the way to end my life," the older man offered with a smile.

Getting a sudden – and vicious – idea, Devil Ray shifted both arms to aim at the heavy stone roof above the monk's head. Firing swiftly, the criminal succeeded in burying the old man in an avalanche of rubble.

While the unified criminals renewed their offensive against the remaining monks, Lex Luthor and Tala proceeded to enter the temple.

Boston Brand, the so called 'Deadman', stayed out of the way as he watched the Master meet the invading force's challenge and swiftly counter it. His merriment increased further when the ancient monk concisely rebuked the costumed man's actions.

His joy turned to sorrow only moments later, however, when the treacherous villain succeeded in burying the monastery's elder beneath several tons of broken rock. Shaking his head sharply, Boston's awareness returned to the present as the renewed sounds of combat resounded across the compound.

Glaring sharply at the orange-skinned woman throwing his friends around as if they weighed only ounces, the ghost screamed, "I'm gonna make you pay!" As was usually the case when no 'gifted' individuals were around, his words went unnoticed.

His prompt and complete possession of the villainess Rampage did not.

With his 'borrowed' corporeal body, the spirit began laying waste to the attacking criminals before his attention was drawn to the two villains who escaped into the temple's interior. Redirecting his charge, the possessed Rampage began marching purposely towards the remaining criminal elements in the monastery.

Unfortunately, the ghost's plans hit a snag when the purple-haired sorceress discovered his unauthorized appropriation of the metahuman and forcefully exorcized him. Now trapped in an

intangible prison, Boston was powerless to intervene as he witnessed the sorceress retrieve her objective - the Heart of Nanga Parbat. Once the artifact was freed from its resting place, the glowing golden sphere began absorbing the souls of the monks sworn to protect it.

"We have what we came for," Tala supplied once the item's dark task was complete. "It's time to leave." With that said, she opened another portal, this one fanning out to collect her teammates. Once the other villains were transported, Tala gave one last glance towards the still restrained ghost before stepping through the vortex. An instant later, the purple field of energy disappeared, taking Boston's restraints with it and allowing the ghost to pointlessly search for survivors.

Exiting the portal last, Tala allowed the spell to collapse in upon itself. Striding past her sometimes teammates, the sorceress kneeled before a patiently waiting primate.

"I have done as you asked, Lord Grodd," the woman announced as she held the glowing orb aloft.

Rolling his eyes, Luthor muttered, "Get off your knees, woman."

Not even sparing the bald criminal a glance, Tala replied, "Not until my master says so."

"Excellent work, my dear," Gorilla Grodd praised as he inspected the spoils of the evening's attack. "You may rise."

As the female mage did so, Lex grimaced as he noted, "You're pathetic! Debasing yourself like that..."

"I owe Grodd everything," Tala insisted in a breathy voice as she leaned against the furry mastermind. "I'd still be trapped in that mirror if he hadn't freed me."

"When Giganta gets out of prison, she ain't gonna appreciate you hanging onto her boyfriend like that," Devil Ray observed idly.

"That's her problem!" the magician fired back. "Giganta's not nearly enough woman for Grodd."

"True," said primate replied smugly.

Lex heaved a sigh before exclaiming, "If you're quite finished demonstrating what an alpha male you are, maybe you'd care to explain just what you intend to do with that thing."

"I already told you," Grodd replied tiredly, "but you won't accept it. You don't believe in magic."

"It's not a matter of belief," Luthor clarified. "I'm just unaccustomed to working with something I don't fully understand."

"As long as the amplifier you built for me works-" the gorilla started, only to be interrupted.

"It does!" Luthor inputted sharply.

Grodd smiled at the interruption. "Then consider this an exotic power source," he explained. "You don't need to understand anything more."

"You can't produce a carrier wave of the amplitude you're talking about with this building's cloaking field generator!" Luthor protested.

"So you've convinced me," Grodd admitted as he continued studying his 'prize'. "I don't intend to use our field generator."

Raising a questioning eyebrow, Lex proposed, "You're planning to build one?"

"Luthor, Luthor, Luthor!" Grodd patronizingly chided. "Why build when we can take what we want?" Turning to address the other gathered villains, the gorilla prompted, "Gentlemen, shall we go?"

Having spent several agonizing minutes sifting through the scattered debris, Boston came to a tragic realization: every one of the monks – his friends – had perished. Forcing himself to return to the ruined edifice of the temple, the ghost collapsed in a heap at the base of the granite steps. His grieving was interrupted, however, by a vortex-inducing phenomenon.

An extremely familiar vortex-inducing phenomena.

"Rama Kushna," Boston greeted duly, "just like you to show up too late to help."

"Your impertinence is as refreshing as always," the Hindu goddess noted calmly, "but have a care – the gods are capricious."

"What do you want from me?" Boston demanded. "The Master is dead! They're all dead!"

"Do not presume to lecture me on the nature of reality," the goddess rebuked. "The monks have not yet passed from this plane."

"They're in some kind of coma?" the undead spirit half-stated, half-questioned.

"That is as close to the truth as you are capable of comprehending," Rama Kushna agreed. "You must retrieve the Heart of Nanga Parbat," the goddess suddenly ordered, "or they will remain in their current state for all time. I have spoken!"

An instant later, Boston found himself floating in the empty temple with no trace of the deity in sight. "How the heck am I supposed to do that?" he asked himself aloud.

"Is that really everything?" Superman asked tiredly nearly an hour later.

"We're done," Batman confirmed. "All reports filed."

Hearing the affirmative reply, Harry marked his page before stowing the book in his coat once more. As he expected, the volume held several helpful hints on the Animagus transformation and Harry could hardly wait until he had some time alone to discover whether he had a form. Standing up, a yawn escaped as the wizard stretched, creating a series of popping noises.

"Good book?" Diana asked.

"It seems promising," Harry confirmed. "The author's theory on magical creatures having multiple forms is very interesting." Glancing down at his watch, the mage discovered that lunchtime had come and gone. "So... who's hungry?"

"I know that I am!" Diana exclaimed. "What do you guys say we get something to eat?" she asked the other two males present. "We hardly ever spend time together when we're not working, and since the scopes are clear this evening..."

"Sounds good to me," Clark seconded, "but I'm tired of commissary food."

"I'd like to, Diana," Bruce declined, "but I've been away from Gotham for too long."

Clark rolled his eyes. "Come on, Bruce," Clark pleaded. "I know a burger joint in Metropolis that has the best fries on the East coast! And the milkshakes are so thick-"

A slight flicker of movement from behind Superman alerted Harry to a potential hazard. Drawing his wand, Harry calmly pushed the Man of Steel out of the way and pointed the short rod at an - to all but Harry - unseen threat. Noticed only by the mage, a spirit had entered the room and was creeping up behind the Man of Steel for unknown reasons. Harry quickly cast a binding charm for such intangible entities to ensure that the ghost did not escape before letting his voice cool a few degrees.

"What is your business here, Spirit?" the wizard demanded.

Diana looked around rapidly but failed to perceive any changes in the area. "Who are you talking to?" the Amazon asked.

Still looking at what appeared to the other three to be thin air, Harry replied grimly, "An excellent question. Well?" he prompted when the strange looking ghost remained silent.

"My name's Boston Brand... but when I'm working, people call me Deadman," the specter finally admitted, all the while squirming in the intangible bonds Harry conjured. "Bats knows me!"

"He says his name is Boston Brand, and that Batman knows him," Harry relayed.

The room's occupants turned to the Caped Crusader as one, awaiting either confirmation or denial.

"You... know this ghost?" Diana asked her teammate.

Batman gave a barely perceptible nod. "Yes. I helped him solve his own murder a few years ago."

Harry dipped his head in acknowledgement and released the binding spell. "All right, that answers who you are," he conceded. "Now, how about explaining why you're here?"

"I need your help on a mission of vengeance!" the ghost informed. Harry then relayed this information to the others present.

"Why are you still around?" Batman asked, looking in the same direction as Harry. "I thought that, after your murder was solved, your exile was ended."

"Yeah, you and me both," Boston said resignedly. "You know how they say 'no good deed goes unpunished'? I guess I shot my mouth off to the wrong deity."

"What is this about?" Diana demanded after Harry had distributed this latest information.

"A bunch of super villains busted into Nanga Parbat and stole a mystic totem filled with the souls of hundreds of monks," the ghost explained heavily, "and they killed the Master."

"Oh, really...?" Harry asked grimly while visions of the helpful monks at Shangri La meeting a similar fate plagued his mind.

The other Leaguers were unable to hear the ghost's comment, but they certainly felt the chilly reaction of their companion.

"Is something wrong?" Superman offered.

"It would appear that a group of misfits broke into Nanga Parbat, murdered the sensei, and used an artifact to steal the other monks' souls," Harry said levelly. Summoning his most commonly used weapons from within his coat, the wizard began fastening them to his person for quicker retrieval. "I find this act... offensive," Harry explained as he prepared to leave. "If you'll excuse me, I believe that I shall go rectify the situation."

"I will be joining you," Batman said gruffly, countering his earlier comment of returning to Gotham. At the curious looks from his teammates, the detective supplied, "The Master was one of my Martial Arts teachers."

Diana laid a comforting hand on the man's shoulder before changing the subject. "Let's get up to Ops and see if you can't pick the bad guys out of a photo array," she offered the ghost.

"Hmm... the first sign of Luthor since he escaped from the Black Hawk Island imprisonment," Superman mused after the culprits had been identified.

"I believe this is bigger than just Luthor," Batman contradicted as he looked over the roster of suspects. Chief among them were Luthor, Devil Ray, Rampage, Bizarro, and Atomic Skull.

"I think he's right," Diana agreed. "Agent Faraday told me Devil Ray escaped from prison. And Bizarro showing up again? And all the odd teams of assorted villains..." she trailed off suggestively.

"Whose brains keep conveniently shorting out when we question them," Superman remarked.

"Remember the one piece of information that J'onn was able to retrieve from Giganta's mind before it shut down?" Batman mused.

"Grodd!" Diana muttered. "Do you think he's put together a new secret society?"

"Except this time he's doing a better job of keeping the secret," the World's Greatest Detective replied dryly.

"So how do we find them?" the Amazonian Princess demanded while crossing her arms and huffing irritably.

"I wish I could help," Boston said desperately, "but all I can pick up from the psychic vibrations are the monks' screaming souls and pictures of Africa."

"Africa?" Harry questioned.

"Yeah, I know, that doesn't narrow things down all that much..." the specter replied, depressed.

"Gorilla city!" Diana exclaimed suddenly. "He's going home!"

Batman quickly strode to the communications array and contacted General Solovar in Gorilla City. "Solovar, this is Batman!"

"What a coincidence," a strained voice replied through the overhead speakers. "I was just about to call you!"

"We wanted to give you a heads up," the Caped Crusader responded. "We have reason to believe that Grodd is headed your way."

"You don't say!" the gorilla replied drolly. "That might explain the armies of super villains attacking the city!"

"How bad?" Batman questioned.

"They've taken over," the ape admitted. "They already hold the central control building! We could use some help if you have any to spare." An explosion echoed over the connection. "Can't chat; signing off!"

"Well, that covers where the punks are hiding," Harry said in a satisfied manner. "So, if you'll be so kind as to point me in the direction of this 'Gorilla City', I can get on with smiting the wicked and retrieving lost souls."

"The location is pre-programmed into the teleporter," Diana supplied, "and we are coming as well."

Harry shrugged resignedly. "As you wish."

The four League members teleported down to Earth and arrived in an arid region surrounded by mountains. Deadman made his appearance known a few moments later as he glided down to hover near the group and made a wise crack.

"Ya know, when those guys on the TV beam down, they never miss!"

Wondering much the same thing, Harry engaged his Mage Sight and immediately craned his neck upwards. Directly in front of the group was a glowing dome, hidden from the naked eye but seemingly guarding something within its boundary.

Whistling softly, Harry noted, "Nice wards."

Walking forward a few steps, Diana began patting her hands against the invisible perimeter. "It's a force field," she answered unnecessarily, "but it also hides the city from prying eyes."

Batman cocked his head to the side and ordered, "Deadman, go inside and find the central control building. Shut down the field generator."

Thinking of a similar ward he had read about and how it could be siphoned off to create temporary passages, Harry drew his sword. As it twisted back into its intimidating scythe form, Harry interrupted. "Don't trouble yourself; I've got it."

Extending the scythe forward, the wizard began using the medium to absorb the concentrated energy from the immediate area of the force field. The weapon glowed a vivid emerald color for a few moments before the image in front of the group wavered and dissolved, revealing a sophisticated metropolitan area.

"Impressive," Diana praised as they made their way inside.

Harry smiled as he laid the weapon over one shoulder. "Never leave home without it."

The noise of gunfire and explosive charges broke up the moment of levity.

"That's our cue!" Superman noted as the group rushed towards the downtown area where the fight was still going strong.

"The most logical place for Grodd to be is the control tower," Batman advised as the Leaguers battled yet another pack of the various criminals running amok.

"That's as good a place to start as any," Harry agreed before banishing a pile of rubble into the forces that Superman and Wonder

Woman were subduing. When the two meta-humans looked in his direction, the wizard asked, "Shall we be going then?"

The group approached what Batman identified as the city's control facility just in time to witness an odd energy discharge emanate from the structure and head directly for them. The fast-paced wave quickly overtook the group of Leaguers, but it seemed to simply slide off Harry's coat, leaving him to ponder the purpose of such an impotent weapon. Scratching his head in puzzlement, Harry looked over his shoulder to question his teammates about its purpose only to draw up short.

On the positive side, the wizard no longer wondered as to the odd energy weapon's intended function. Unfortunately, this knowledge brought a new challenge – namely, how to transfigure three costumed gorillas back into their original humanoid forms.

"Oh, come on!" Diana complained as she studied one of her new furry appendages. While neither of her male companions spoke, Harry could tell that neither of them were particularly amused by this latest turn of events. Seeing the aqua-colored energy wall continue on its course away from them, Harry took in the unguarded state of the control building before returning his attention to his teammates. As it stood, the wizard was faced with two entirely separate but equally important problems. On the one hand, the soul thieves were likely in the citadel ahead of him; on the other, his three teammates had just devolved into an entirely separate species. The two conundrums warred against each other in Harry's mind for a mere instant before he reached a resolution regarding the tasks' priorities.

The Wizarding instant camera announced its presence with a series of audible clicks as the mage sufficiently photographed the entire incident. Once he finished recording the Marauder-level transfiguration, Harry returned his camera to its proper place within his coat and fired a Reductor curse at the building's entrance. "Well," the wizard replied sedately as he strolled into the facility, "let's get this over with." His entreaty broke up the other leaguers' impromptu revenge plotting and the three costumed heroes hurried along behind him.

Inside, they found three peo... apes surrounding a suspicious piece of machinery. If their clothing was anything to go by, two of the three primates were recently Homo sapiens. Harry immediately launched

several curses at the group, all of which were deflected by a projected shield.

"Get us out of here, Tala!" the likely Grodd ordered the purple-haired ape. An instant later, the three mammals disappeared, leaving a very angry wizard in their wake.

"Why do they always run?" Harry grumbled to himself.

Meanwhile, Supermonkey – who had noticed the increasingly unstable behavior of the machine – charged over and began punching the device or forcibly tearing off components. Unfortunately for the transformed Kryptonian, he also succeeded in initiating a massive explosion as the device went critical.

As Diana ran over to the dazed – and newly restored - Man of Steel, Harry fished the glowing orb out of the machine. Holding it under one arm, he made his way to the unsteady Kryptonian. "You know," Harry said idly, "you really should look before you leap; you'll live longer. Trust me on that."

"Okay..." Clark said uneasily, still not completely comfortable with their new team member's... occupation. "Is everyone okay?"

"Well..." Diana led off with a sigh, "I'm sort of missing Flash's obligatory joke about how Grodd made a monkey out of us."

Superman smiled slightly. "Just couldn't let it go unsaid," he noted wryly.

"Obligatory," Diana agreed mischievously as she helped the Man of Steel to his feet.

"It appears that we are in your debt yet again, Justice League," a voice called out from the building's entrance." Harry looked over and spotted a white ape making its way towards them.

"If only Luthor and Grodd hadn't gotten away," Superman said in a disappointed tone.

"If it's any consolation," Solovar offered, "we captured nearly a dozen of his super powered cronies – with more to come, I'm sure."

A flicker of motion over the snowy primate's shoulder roused Harry's attention. He immediately recognized that Devil Ray had snuck in behind the ape and had just fired one of his poison darts at Diana's unprotected flank. Harry instinctively cast a reflective shield around the Amazon, which made a slight pinging noise an instant later as the projectile struck it and rebounded. The wizard watched its new trajectory morbidly as it sailed back across the room and tore into the antagonist's helmet. The masked figure lurched backwards, impacting against a bared electrical panel and effectively electrocuting his self.

Batman strode over to the downed figure and removed the helmet. A quick check confirmed the fatality, which he reported to the others.

Supremely unconcerned, Harry shrugged. At seeing the others' apprehensiveness at the sudden death, he added, "If it was his time to die, then it was his time to die. Besides, he was a murderer and a thief and - in the last twenty-four hours - he has attempted to kill Diana no less than three times. He is hardly worth your sympathy."

"Yeah, yeah," Boston interrupted, "it's a real shame that the chump has bitten the big one and all, but can we get those souls back to Nanga Parbat now?"

"Yes, I would imagine that there are several monks waiting on us," Harry agreed.

"Well, where is this... Nanga Parbat?" Diana asked.

"Western end of the Himalayas," Batman informed her, "just south of the Indus River, in the Diamir District of the Northern Areas of Pakistan."

"Okay..." she said hesitantly, "so how are we going to find this place?"

Harry concentrated on his burden and felt a slight pull to the northeast. Realizing what the sensation truly was, he mentioned, "I can take us directly there. Grab on."

The others bid Solovar farewell and grabbed onto Harry's coat, some more reluctant than others. The wizard then Apparated the group to the destination he sensed from the Heart of Nanga Parbat.

"I don't think that I'll ever get used to that feeling," Diana muttered as the group suddenly appeared in the middle of a rustic monastery. "It's like someone is bulldozing me over with a mattress!"

Catching her comment, Harry smirked and replied, "I always thought of it as being stuffed through a straw." The wizard shrugged and continued, "In any case, our target is in that direction," while gesturing towards the damaged temple. Absentmindedly repairing the collapsed foyer as he went, Harry left the elderly monk in Batman's custody and strode inside the shrine.

The orb gradually grew warmer until it peaked just as he reached a giant Buddha statue. Seeing its outstretched and empty hands, the mage mentally flipped a coin before placing the orb between the statue's palms. As soon as he did so, the totem erupted in great flashes of light. Hundreds of balls of concentrated energy came barreling out of the sphere as they headed towards their rightful place. Within a matter of seconds, the device seemed to be empty and the monks were slowly stirring. Seeing no reason to tarry further, Harry exited the shrine just in time to observe Batman and Diana helping the elderly cleric to his feet.

"Well, that's that!" Harry exclaimed as he sensed Deadman approaching their location.

"T-the Master's... okay, right?" Boston asked anxiously as he swirled around the smaller man.

"I am well, Boston Brand," the slight monk offered before looking closer at his rescuers. Squinting at the cowed visage of the Bat, the older man suddenly smiled. "It would appear that you have found your purpose, Lost One," the old man pronounced in a satisfied tone.

The Caped Crusader dipped his head slightly before adding – reluctantly, it seemed – "I have, Sensei."

The robed figure's smile drew even wider. "It would also appear that you have found kindred spirits along your journey."

This time, Harry was certain that the infamous Batman paused before something forced him to answer. "As you have foretold – repeatedly –, Sensei," he grudgingly announced.

At the monk's behest, both Clark and Diana introduced themselves. "Well met," he greeted the two superheroes before catching sight of Harry patiently studying the various carvings around the temple's entrance. "And who is your other companion, my student?" the old man prompted, a suspicious gleam in his eyes.

Hearing himself addressed, Harry took it upon himself to handle the introduction. Patterning his overture after the formal statements of the Shanghai monks, Harry said, "I am known as Black, Old One."

The wizard quickly discarded any hopes that he harbored for an uneventful trip when his greeting translated into the monks' native tongue. While Harry was certain that his attire would draw some attention from the robed figures, he certainly did not expect every one of them to fall on their knees while crying 'Krishna' and 'Vishnu'. The fact that some were quietly inquiring of their fellows the reasoning for his pale skin was also a source of confusion for the dimension-hopping mage.

"Not again," Harry groaned despairingly under his breath. His volume was apparently still too high, however, as he heard a snort from Superman's direction. Wonder Woman's shoulders seemed unnaturally tense as well, he later decided.

Placing his hands under the elderly man's arms, the wizard hauled the monk back to his feet. "Rise," Harry entreated the other monks. "Please," he added in a low key, sparking another reaction from the two metahumans.

"How may we serve, Great One?" the head monk inquired respectfully.

"By continuing your good work," Harry answered. "News of your condition reached me and I wished to aid you."

"Your timely assistance is much appreciated, Divine One," the old man praised, nearly causing Harry to wince.

"I don't suppose that you'd consider just calling me 'Mr. Black', would you?" Harry asked hopefully. "I'm sort of trying to stay under the radar this time around, if you catch my meaning."

"As you wish, Sri Krishna," the monk acknowledged with a bow.

Shaking his head in dismay, Harry noticed that Boston was still floating around and chose to change the subject. "I was under the impression that your business was complete, Boston. Why are you still here?"

"You got me, man!" the ghost replied with a shrug. "I guess Rama Kushna's just like every other woman – always making the guy wait!"

Harry snorted at the ghost's response and was rather grateful that the pro-feminist Diana was unable to hear the spirit. Before he could ask any other questions, however, the group was interrupted as a purple vortex quickly spun into being.

"Boston Brand," an ethereal voice pronounced, "your actions have led to the death of another."

"Hey, it wasn't my fault!" Boston pleaded, and Harry felt his sometimes annoying saving-people-thing activate.

"He speaks the truth, Rama Kushna," Harry blurted before he could stop himself. Feeling the intangible female's attention on him, the wizard continued. "The individual in question had thrice attempted to harm the wellbeing of my friend. It was his own actions that ultimately destroyed him, not any force under Boston's control. Should you choose to look more closely at the matter, I believe that you will find that the man had sufficient opportunities to repent and he spurned them all."

The goddess was silent for a few moments. "It is as you say, Dark One," the goddess finally replied. "Yet, the scales of Karma are still unbalanced; the person who began this chain of events remains unpunished."

"Allow Boston to continue on to his next destination," Harry entreated. "I accept the task of bringing this dark witch to justice."

"Such a chore is Boston's duty, not yours," Rama Kushna replied, "yet you would assume the burden anyway. Why?"

"Boston's powers have proven... insufficient to the task of capturing this woman," Harry explained shortly, "and her crime offends me."

Another moment of silence fell as the other immortal considered his proposal. "So be it."

"Yeah! Woohoo!" Deadman cheered. "Thanks, man, you're the best!"

Harry smiled slightly at the ghost's exuberance. "Goodbye, Boston," Harry bid. "Tell everyone 'hi' for me."

"You got it, Mr. Black!" the spirit's voice called out as he entered the swirling portal. The purple vortex rapidly shrunk in size and, a moment later, it was gone.

Attempting to avoid the awestruck gazes, Harry glanced at his watch and noticed that it was definitely past lunchtime. "Well, I am glad that you are all feeling better," Harry told the attending monks, "but I must be going. Duty calls, and all that. You take care of yourselves."

The others made their own farewells before the group withdrew outside of the monastery's boundaries. Before Harry could offer a return trip, however, Diana quickly suggested, "How about we just fly to that restaurant?"

Harry rather poorly hid a grin. For some reason, he found the notion that the Amazon warrior – who frequently shrugged off heavy artillery fire with ease – shied away from Apparating to be exceptionally amusing.

"As you wish," the wizard replied before concentrating on Henchgirl's flight charm. He had practiced extensively the night before and could now fly in the direction he was facing. With a greater effort, he could even maintain a flight path in a straight line. Silently casting the charm, Harry encircled the three other League members in a transparent shield and took to the air.

After the three Leaguers recovered from the sudden relocation, the Kryptonian reporter could not help but ask, "So... I take it that that sort of fanfare happens a lot?"

Harry looked at the metahuman out of the corner of one eye. "More so than I would like," the wizard admitted after a few moments. "Now... where is this burger shack again?"

"Is all this for real?" Gallatea demanded as she tossed the classified dossier down on the polished desk.

"As far as we are aware... yes," Amanda Waller reluctantly admitted. 'The plan had started so promisingly,' the Director of Metahuman Affairs reminisced. Just as she had planned, the Cadmus-created clone literally jumped at the opportunity to free herself from the dingy confines of Belle Reeve. In exchange, all she had to do was to infiltrate the Justice League and ferret out the truth regarding one of their new recruits. 'Perfectly acceptable, no questions asked' was the blonde woman's response. All was right with the world.

That was, until she began reading up on the target in question.

"So, let me get this straight," the shapely powerhouse grumbled. "The guy's name is Mr. Black, he's reported to be immortal – if not invulnerable -, and so far has demonstrated virtually every superpower that any metahuman has ever possessed. In addition, the League suspects him as being either the personification of Death or some as-yet unidentified god. Did I pretty much cover everything?"

"More or less," Waller agreed calmly. "Besides the various reports from the League and Agent Faraday's own observations, we also have unconfirmed reports of Black's involvement in a few... unsavory matters."

"Oh?" Gallatea asked impatiently. "How so?"

"I'm sure that you're not aware of the fact," Amanda expounded, "but the Pacific Tsunami Warning system started picking up reports of large-scale storm activity in the Pacific late last night."

"Yeah, so," the taller woman impudently replied, "that sort of thing happens all the time."

"Not without them having some advanced notice, it doesn't," the Director noted. "And if they had somehow missed a storm building,

the National Weather Service or any of our other organizations should have caught sight of it – except that they didn't."

Gallatea looked mildly confused. "Don't you people have satellites watching for stuff like that?"

"Of course we do," Waller agreed. "According to our experts, however, the findings are... inconclusive," she finished humorously.

"Okay... so what?" she demanded.

Waller took a deep breath before replying, "According to a NSA report filed this morning, the tracking beacon we installed in Black's submarine was determined as being in the area at the time in question."

The blonde clone looked lost. "And your point is...?" she asked.

"My point," Amanda stressed, "is that at 0108 hours the 'Lucky Duck', a container ship – which was apparently smuggling military-grade arms into the country - was capsized just inside international waters. There were no survivors; in fact, we wouldn't have even known of their true cargo had a secret manifest not been recovered by Coast Guard divers as they searched for survivors."

At the shorter woman's pointed look, Gallatea snorted. "Coincidence," she protested.

Waller smiled smugly. "At 0127 hours, a separate disturbance was reported over a hundred miles away from the original site. Another ship, the 'Pride of Neptune', was also capsized. Unlike the 'Duck', however, the 'Pride' was transporting a boatload of young American children, not weapons."

"I don't get it," the blonde admitted.

"They were kidnap victims, Gallatea, and were intended to be sold as slaves on the Black market," Amanda explained slowly. "The 'Pride' was part of the slave trade and was transporting the kidnapped children to a distribution center overseas. The strange part is that while the ship itself was a total loss and the crew drowned to the last man, every single young man and woman aboard were found completely unharmed – there was not even a

case of mild hypothermia reported from the chilled water temperature. None of the children witnessed anything, and no evidence has been found of foul play as of yet."

Galatea shook her head. "Are you telling me that you believe that this guy somehow tracked down this pack of cretins, conjured a storm strong enough to tip two freighters, and was able to pick off an entire crew of slavers – all without harming a single hostage or being seen - inside of a half-hour?"

The shorter woman leaned back in her chair and placed her hands in her lap. "It's certainly one explanation, and the one that the White House wishes investigated immediately."

"Impossible!" Gallatea blurted. "No one is that powerful – they just can't be!"

Her hostess chuckled wryly. "You know, ten years ago I would have said the same thing about cloning an extraterrestrial. I've learned to not dismiss ideas right off the bat just because they don't seem feasible at the time. But, " she offered, "if you need further proof, I have a simulation showing the storm's activity along with our best guess of Black's trajectory during the same timeframe."

The short woman entered a few commands into her attending computer, causing a wall-mounted display to come to life. "Watch carefully," she cautioned.

An overhead view of the Pacific Coast was present, along with three computer-generated markers. A second later, the presentation began running and the 'Mr. Black' icon began moving along a westbound arc. Just as it caught up with the 'Lucky Duck' symbol, however, the map darkened as the computer began rendered increasingly turbulent conditions. The ship's marker suddenly disappeared as the 'Mr. Black' image showed a marked increase in velocity. Waller then advanced the time until 'Black' had nearly overtaken 'Pride' on the map before events slowed to a crawl once more.

Gallatea watched disbelievingly as the turbulent surface conditions rammed into the second ship, causing it to wink out of existence as well. An instant later showed the map completely clear of adverse

conditions and a slower moving submarine casually making its way further out to sea.

"How accurate is this?" the blonde clone demanded quietly.

"Our computers regard this scenario as being 98.7% accurate," the Director supplied seriously. "Your mission," she continued, "is to discover all available information on Black. We must know what else he is capable of, as well as his intentions regarding the United States. Needless to say, the President is more than a little concerned at the portents this situation holds for National Security. The possibility of a Justice Lords' scenario was terrible enough but this – this man could potentially unleash Armageddon."

"You have a point," Gallatea admitted resignedly. "So, how do we play this charade?"

"Just leave everything to me," was the distinctly un-reassuring reply.

After the group had dined, Harry had departed for parts unknown, leaving the other three Leaguers to return to the Watchtower via the teleporter. Once the trio had sequestered themselves in a vacant conference room, the Man of Steel started the post-mission debriefing. "Alright, what exactly happened at the end there?" the Kryptonian asked. "I know that I've heard something about a 'Krishna' before."

"The term Krishna in Sanskrit has the literal meaning of 'black' or 'dark one'," Batman explained. "Krishna, or Sri Krishna, is also reported to be the 57th name of Vishnu."

"My ancient folklore is a little rusty," Clark responded sarcastically. "Help me out here."

"Krishna is one of the Hindu gods," Diana supplied. "They believe that the Earth was originally overrun by demons called Asuras. According to legend, the Earth called for help from Brahma, who sent all the gods to battle the Asuras and restore truth and virtue."

"Correct," Batman agreed and added, "Krishna is allegedly credited with killing hundreds of armies led by the extensions of the demigods' enemies. Supposedly, he descends into this world

whenever it becomes obstructed by the demoniac to deliver the righteous and annihilate the miscreants."

The Man of Steel collapsed heavily into his seat. "So...", he began tiredly, "not only is Mr. Black the Grim Reaper – who's taken out entire armies for the Israelites -, but now we find that he's an ancient Hindu god who repeatedly reincarnates on Earth whenever it is endangered by ultimate evil and wipes out armies for another populace?"

"Apparently so," Diana agreed.

"So... who is he, really?" the Kryptonian finally demanded. "I mean, he can't be both of them... can he?"

"You're asking the wrong question," Batman countered levelly as he began to exit the room.

"Oh? How's that?" Clark asked.

The Dark Knight paused at the threshold. "The issue that should be concerning you is - if the Master is correct about Black's identity and this Krishna only shows himself when the Earth is imperiled by demons - why is he here now?"

With that cryptic comment to mark his retreat, Batman headed back towards his own city, leaving behind two suddenly worried metahumans.

In the Secret Society's headquarters, the mood was grim. Every member attended the emergency meeting and the gathered super villains anxiously awaited the arrival of their de facto leader, Gorilla Grodd, and the explanation for their earlier transformations.

"Well," Lex Luthor began as soon as Grodd made his appearance, "since there's only one monkey left around here, I'm assuming that the Justice League found a way to stop the carrier wave."

"There's more than one way to peel a banana," Grodd responded sharply. "Next time..."

Luthor suddenly grinned as he rose to his feet. "I wasn't going to do this for another few weeks, but seriously... turning all of humanity

into apes?" he demanded mockingly. "That was your master plan?" Without waiting for a reply, Luthor drew on of his pistols and fired, smoothly catching Grodd in the sternum.

The thud that the furry body made as it impacted against the floor brought many of the gathered criminals to their feet. Ignoring their distraction, Luthor holstered his weapon and strode to Grodd's former position at the head of the table. "Listen up," he demanded, "from now on I'm in charge of this operation. Anybody got a problem with that?" he asked insultingly.

The vast majority of the villains offered no response whatsoever, but a few offered Luthor a slight smile.

"No problem at all... baby," Tala confirmed as she began rubbing against Luthor's side, much like she had formerly done with Grodd.

Luthor smiled in a satisfied manner, both at the woman's fickle nature and the situation in general.

The Question stared at his bulletin board cluttered with interconnected scraps of paper in growing confusion as he attempted to massage away the beginnings of another headache.

It was all Batman's fault.

Only days ago, the supposed 'World's Greatest Detective' had come to him with a seemingly straightforward objective. The assignment was to simply shadow a character named Mr. Black and find out more about him.

That was where everything began going wrong.

Given that the suspect could teleport anywhere he desired - and, for some unfathomable reason had never been issued a communicator -, tracking the dark clad individual's whereabouts was challenging. Fortunately, the Question's sleuthing skills were up to the task and he managed to follow the elusive Mr. Black - along with a quartet of League women - to Las Vegas, where he had apparently accomplished two objectives: collected a verifiable fortune from one of Vegas' premiere casinos, and neutralized an elusive serial killer.

Unfortunately, the Question's good luck ended there. The lack of success was, in fact, maddening. The few meager clues that he had managed to retrieve were both confusing and contradictory. The results of the League-administered blood test were even worse, spawning a multitude of arguments and counter-arguments.

The first issue, as the Question saw it, was the toxicity of the blood sample. All of his tests concluded that Black's blood was exceptionally volatile, and was continually becoming even more toxic with every new compound that it encountered. However, the current sample's toxicity index would seem to disprove the theory that Black was a spy for the British. Had the mysterious man been a secret agent, it should have contained a much wider array of both toxins and neurotoxins. As it was, the latter was completely nonexistent and the former did not even come close to reflecting the number of toxic substances that such an individual would have encountered over the past few decades.

The next complication involved the supposition that the subject was immortal. Basic genetic theory stated that a human being continually replaced dead cells with new ones spawned via mitosis throughout the course of their lives. As a person aged, this process became less and less efficient, resulting in both insufficient copies and quantities of cells. His preliminary analysis - which substantiated the League physicians' claims - indicated that Black's system was turning out perfect cellular duplicates in excessive quantities. Such a result seemed to confirm the hypothesis of immortality and hinted at the presence of an advanced regenerative ability.

However, further evidence would suggest that, while Black might be immortal, he certainly was not invulnerable. Devil Ray's success with the poisoned dart attack proved that the man's skin was at least partially vulnerable to penetration, signifying that perhaps Black was not immortal – per se – but merely healed at such a rate as to reverse the passage of time. The most conclusive test that the Question derived was to stop Black's heart entirely and observe whether his other life processes continued.

Needless to say, the chances of this plan ever being enacted were approximately equal to that of porcine pilots obtaining their FAA certification.

Despite the exact methodology of Black's longevity, there was overwhelming evidence to suggest a lifetime not less than two thousand years. Unfortunately, there was no mechanism in place to verify this claim as any scars Black might have accrued could have been repaired by his theorized regenerative powers. Additionally, any telltale battle scars that might have remained would most likely be concentrated on the torso and arms – areas that Black seemed to cover with either his omnipresent coat or via various mystical means.

Each of these contradictions and counter-arguments continued to muddy the quest to unearth Mr. Black's secrets, especially since every single piece of information provided by his teammates' recollections failed to match up to the rest of the available data.

After staring at the jumble overtaking his workspace, the Question finally reached a single bedrock conclusion: Mr. Black had not one single verifiable connection outside of the League itself. It was as though he was created the very day they met him.

Yet another of Mr. Black's many anomalies seemed to jump out at the seasoned investigator as he lounged in his worn desk chair. The article in question was a newspaper clipping from one of the Las Vegas' rags announcing that 'The Black Cat' was closing its doors. The publication went further to explain that the premiere night spot – which just so happened to be visited by Mr. Black - had been raided and condemned due to the presence of illegal equipment tampering. The police's investigative team discovered various mechanisms designed to cheat the former casino's customers, such as rigged slot machines and roulette tables. The corruption was so complete that even the playing cards were sabotaged, having been marked with an infrared ink to allow the establishment's employees to track individual cards via special contact lenses.

And yet, Black had walked away from that casino with a large amount of cash.

Rubbing his face again, the Question put the finishing touches on his report and sealed the file before sending it to Batman's secured terminal.

'Let the Dark Knight solve his own problem,' the tired detective spitefully decided.

Batman finished reading Question's report before carefully ensuring that the document was saved on his system in the Cave. Once he was positive that the Batcomputer had the data archived, the World's Greatest Detective leaned back in his giant chair and started to smirk. The smirk grew progressively larger and he began to laugh, increasing in volume until Nightwing, who was maintaining some of his equipment in another portion of the Batcave, came to investigate.

Grabbing a syringe that the Bat family had on hand for such obvious exposures to Smilex gas, Dick Grayson rushed to his adoptive father's side. Immediately, Bruce's adoptive son removed a small piece of Bruce's armor and prepared to inject the antidote when a black gauntleted hand stilled his movements.

"N... no need, Son!" the Caped Crusader got out as he continued to laugh.

Nightwing, inheriting all of his father's stubbornness, was far from convinced. "You need this!" he protested and made to try again.

Batman exerted his will and brought himself back under control, drawing Dick's attention away from the syringe.

"Alright, Bruce, what's going on?" Dick demanded.

"I finally understand an old saying," the older man answered amusedly, his lips still twitching.

"What saying?" Nightwing questioned, completely baffled by his father's unprecedented good mood.

"I know you discovered our recent... guest's identity," Batman replied. "You did leave a number of empty bottles cluttering the living room, after all."

Dick, remembering that night, did not deny the allegation and merely replied, "So?"

"Mr. Black visited a casino in Las Vegas recently, where he informed certain League members that the gambling devices were rigged," Batman explained. "To prove his point, he started placing winning bets – and kept winning all night."

"I fail to see the humor," Dick admitted.

"Read this," Bruce demanded while pointing to the screen. When his son had finished skimming the document, he supplied, "I was reminded of the old adage: 'You can't cheat Death; he'll always get his due.'"

Having taken his leave of the League's 'Golden Trio', Harry wandered around Metropolis for a while until his journey led him to the industrial-grade wharf. Having run out of ideas for further amusement in the big city and feeling the sea's call, the wizard discreetly headed to a secluded section of beach. Once there, he launched his submarine and set a lackadaisical course across the Atlantic. On a lark, he headed in the general direction of Britain.

After a few hours of idly exploring the Atlantic's scenery, Harry found himself off the coast of his home – or rather, this world's version of Britain. Thinking of his faraway abode began to sour the wizard's mood - to the point of calling it quits for the evening and returning to the Watchtower. In fact, Harry was preparing to do just that when he suddenly sensed something powerful in his vicinity. Killing the engines, the dimensional traveler engaged his Mage Sight and searched for the strange disturbance.

Seeing a glowing blue object off the Starboard side, Harry cast a Bubblehead Charm on himself and slipped through the submarine's sidewall. In a matter of seconds, Harry reached his target and was amazed to find a pale – if fact, nearly translucent – woman hovering in place and watching his approach. On closer inspection, the wizard could clearly see that this woman – whoever she was – was not entirely human. She seemed to possess the same attractiveness as the many Veela he had encountered over the years while, at the same time, still maintaining a certain sorrow reminiscent of ghosts longing to pass on.

Closing the remaining distance, Harry stopped in front of the faintly glowing female. "Good evening, Miss," the wizard greeted, "my name is Mr. Black. Can I help you?"

"I am known as Viviane," the woman announced in an echoing voice, "and I hath anticipated thine arrival for many years."

"Oh...?" Harry asked, suddenly wary of this Divination drivel. "Why is that?"

The woman seemed – if possible – to grow even more melancholy. "I have been charged for many seasons to safeguard an heirloom of great power. Humankind hath needed mine burden many times in thine world above, but none hath possessed the necessary ability to wield its might. Mine brothers and sisters hath long since passed from this world which hath forgotten them, but I am forbidden from following whilst mine task remains undone."

Thinking back to Boston Brand's similar predicament – which he resolved just a matter of hours ago –, Harry nodded that he understood and replied, "My condolences for your loss, Miss Viviane, but I am unclear as to how I am involved."

"Only when a suitable champion presents himself might I yield mine encumbrance and rejoin mine kindred," the submerged female explained. "Only he who is pure of heart, strong of mind, and mighty of body may wield mine burden with impunity."

Harry still looked on, confused. "I understand what you are saying," he confirmed, "but I am unclear as to how I can assist you. Are you wishing for me to help find this champion?" the wizard hazarded a guess.

"Thou art the champion I seek," the woman said firmly.

"Me?" Harry demanded incredulously. "I'm not a 'champion' of anything, and I'm certainly not 'pure of heart'! You must be mistaken!"

Viviane looked less than convinced. "Thou doth possesseth the gift even more so than the wizard Myrddin, but thine heart doth not hunger for power. Thou doth safeguard the helpless in times of need, but never hast thou desired recompense. Thou art the champion I seek," she finished resolutely.

"Listen," Harry pleaded, "I'm hardly that noble. Yes, I've got something of a 'saving people thing', but I just did what anyone else would, given the same choice."

"Thy supposition is incorrect," she disagreed. "Thou wert made unique among men for a purpose. Thine purpose will be aided by mine charge."

Harry shook his head again. "Surely you've confused me with someone else," he offered feebly.

"There existeth no error," she remained adamant. "None other among the living possesseth the right, and none other shall be born to taketh thine appointed place. If thou doth not taketh mine burden, I shall be imprisoned here forevermore."

'Great!' Harry groaned mentally. 'Even in another universe, the bloody prophecy manages to haunt me!'

Sighing to himself, the wizard conceded and announced, "Very well. What is this 'burden' you keep mentioning?"

The woman's constant melancholy seemed to abate as a long and slender object formed above her outstretched hands. "Behold Caledfwich, the sword of Champions!" she announced in ringing tones.

Harry blinked at the Summoned object which Viviane held in her slight hands. Looking closely at the sheathed sword, the wizard noted a design of two serpents engraved on its golden hilt. The scabbard itself was plain in design, consisting of tanned leather wrapped in golden wire. Holding the tool of war out to him, Viviane instructed, "Draw forth the weapon, for it is now thine."

Even without using his Sight, Harry could feel the power restrained within the artifact. Carefully, he accepted the sword and gingerly separated the weapon from its sheath. Holding the tremendous slab of iron single-handedly, Harry nearly dropped the device when it suddenly burned brighter than the sun. Blinking away the spots in his vision, Harry instinctively wished the sword to assume a milder illumination – and was once more surprised when it instantly complied.

With the lighting at a more comfortable level, Harry inspected the magical object. Even at its current radiance, it seemed as though the two serpents upon the hilt possessed rivers of fire flowing out of their mouths. Along the massive blade itself, he spied a set of runes

decorating its length. Unfamiliar with the language, the wizard fetched his eyeglasses and looked again. This time, he was able to clearly read the phrase 'To Him Unconquered' along both sides of the blade.

Harry's inspection was interrupted as the ethereal voice of his companion announced, "At last, mine task lies complete. I may finally rest."

Looking up, Harry was astonished to find the woman quickly fading from sight. "Wait!" he shouted. "Come back! I don't know what it is you expect me to do with this thing!"

"Thou doth already possess all the knowledge thou needeth," her whispery voice informed. "Thou wilt know what thou must do when the time is right." With that parting comment, the ghostly figure faded completely, leaving Harry treading water in the middle of an ocean all alone.

Looking back down at the sword again, another sigh escaped from the wizard.

"Why can't I just take a normal vacation like everybody else?"

Commissioner Gordon shook his head as he waited near the Bat-signal. He had dealt with many strange situations over the years when it came to the Bat and his many foes, but the purpose for this current Bat-summoning had to be close to the top of the list in terms of strangeness. So engrossed in the situation was Gordon that he hardly even startled when the familiar voice came out of the shadows on the rooftop.

"You wanted to see me, Commissioner?"

Turning, Gordon gave the cowled figure a wry grin. "Oddly enough, I'm merely passing along a message this time."

Batman's voice held the slightest trace of what might have been humor had it been anyone else as he replied. "That's not a job that one would normally associate with a person of your standing, so I take it that this is a special message, then?"

"In a manner of speaking. It involves Pamela Lillian Isley," the Commissioner announced. "As you are no doubt aware, it's been nearly a week since she was poisoned by hitherto unknown means. We couldn't just lock her up again; since her last release from Arkham, she hasn't committed any crimes..."

"That you know of," Batman interjected. "Ivy's not one to rest on her laurels; she always has an agenda in the works."

His friend shrugged. "You and I both know that but, until someone comes forward to press a complaint or new evidence of a crime is uncovered, she's a citizen in good standing in the eyes of the law. The anonymous caller who tipped us off as to her location just reported a suspicious person in the park, and has refused to press any charges." He jammed a hand into his pocket and fingered his pipe before sighing and leaving it where it was yet again. Blast his promise to his daughter!

"Be that as it may," Gordon continued, "she's been in a coma in the Bio-Isolation Ward at Gotham University Hospital since the incident. Until she woke up a little over an hour ago, that is."

"I've been monitoring her case," came the baritone reply. "Ivy's too dangerous to not keep tabs on, especially in this case. The doctors still don't have a clue as to what infected her system, but there were a few changes; the green tint to her skin deepened a few shades, the sclera of her eyes changed to an almost neon-green tint, and that blossom in her hair is now apparently a natural outgrowth from her scalp."

"There's more to it than just the visual changes, but I suspect that you've already read the rest of the doctors' reports," James commented. "The important thing right now is to find out why her first coherent words after waking up were what the duty nurse described as a very polite request to speak with you."

The rooftop was silent for a moment before the Dark Knight replied, "Well, since she asked so nicely..."

The Bio-Isolation Ward of Gotham University Hospital, Pamela Isley decided, was entirely too sterile. Oh, they tried - what with the patterns on the walls and the soothing natural sounds played over the room speakers - but the room really needed a more natural

touch. She pressed the button on her bed controls and raised her head level just a bit more for comfort. Picking up the small disposable water pitcher on an adjacent table, she filled her cup before considering the remaining contents of the container. "Distilled," she muttered resignedly, "not even a touch of mineral for taste."

Shrugging, she plucked a hair from her head and dropped it in the pitcher before adding some pollen from the flower above her right ear.

"Mixing a mischief cocktail, Ivy?" The voice was deep, familiar, and not entirely unexpected, but Ivy still startled slightly regardless. When she looked up, a familiar cowed figure stood by the observation window of her chamber.

The lighting was low enough to support the twilight dusk that the Detective preferred, but not so dark as to fail to reveal the presence farther away of several other individuals in the observation area.

Offering her viewers a cheery wave, Ivy placed one hand over the top of the pitcher. "I see you got my message, Batman. I appreciate you taking time out of your busy evening schedule to visit a shut-in."

"You did ask politely," her frequent opponent responded. His voice dropped almost to a growl as he continued, "Now, why don't you tell me the reason behind your request? And stop playing with that concoction before something happens that you probably won't enjoy."

"Harley's right," Ivy noted, "you do have socialization issues." Nevertheless, she took her hand off the pitcher's top and slid the vessel across her swing table to the far side. "Would it kill you to have a talk with a beautiful woman that didn't involve implied violence?"

Batman failed to rise to the bait. "You wanted to talk; I'm here."

Pamela sighed. "Fine. I'll admit that I didn't ask to see you just to mention the fact that most of the girls in our little circle think that the thing you need the most is to catch someone and spend a weekend or two relaxing in the bedroom... or exercising, as the case might be."

She couldn't be certain but she thought she detected a touch of frost on the observation window.

"Any way," she continued sedately, "I was out in the park one night a week or so ago and I met someone I think might be an associate of yours. Long black cloak, sort of messy black hair, green eyes, rides a ghostly stallion... any of this ringing a bell?"

"I might know the individual you're talking about," Batman admitted gruffly.

"There was something about him that immediately attracted me," Ivy admitted while toying with her cup. "He was just standing there by his horse, and I felt that I just had to get to know him. He was so flustered that I was showing interest in him that he practically froze solid when I gave him a hug and a kiss."

Her fingers trailed across her lips. "His lips certainly ought to be registered as lethal weapons." She paused, unsure. If she did not know better, she would have sworn that she just heard a faint snort escaping from Batman's lips. Continuing, she said, "I mean, everyone hears tales about people who can send you off with just a kiss, but this guy really managed it."

Her fingers absently reached up and traced the edges of the petals of the flower over her ear. "It was so strong that I thought I was going to die."

"I suppose there must be a reason why they call it the 'little death'," Batman muttered quietly, but still loud enough for the microphone to carry the comment into the isolation chamber.

Ivy shook her head, lost in the memory. "I really don't remember much after that. I know I fell down, but I didn't really even see him leave. Everything was sort of hazy and gray, and I couldn't really feel my body at all. That's when it happened."

"What happened?" Batman demanded while subtly double-checking his recorder in case this information might prove useful later.

"Do you remember the Swamp Thing talking about The Green?" Batman could hear the capitals in her speech but, before he could

respond, the redhead continuing speaking. "I was starting to feel colder and the gray was deepening to black when - all of a sudden - it was like being in the middle of the lushest greenhouse around. It was like I could feel every plant... no, it was as if I was every plant. I could feel the sun, taste the air around me, the water in the ground..."

Her eyes lost focus, as for a few minutes she relived a portion of her experience. Her hands absently caressed the pitcher's sides, causing Batman to tense as his hand strayed to the 'Ivy' compartments in his utility belt. "I don't know how long I was there - the doctors tell me I was in a coma for a little over a week - but it was like something there was examining me, the same way that a gardener checks her garden for problems. It was like I was both the object of study and part of the study process at the same time."

Her hands stilled for a moment before her eyes came back into sharp focus, meeting and holding Batman's gaze through the triple-pane glass. There was a faint greenish glow visibly backlighting her eyes and, if the Great Detective was not mistaken, a tear was welling up at one eye.

"Have you ever looked at your life and really known that, no matter how hard you tried, you were only making things worse instead of better?" Pamela demanded sorrowfully. "I mean, here was the great 'Poison Ivy', protector of Nature and punisher of those who despoiled its beauty! Sure, one or two people who caused problems were taken care of, but the corporations kept right on going. A girl's got to eat, so what's wrong with a few thefts to support the cause? Bored? Go out and find a jerk or two and make them pay for disrespecting women in general. Protect a park and save a few orphans? Great, but let's ignore the fact that just being around you is slowly killing the closest thing to a... family..."

Her voice failed and Ivy swiped the back of a hand across her face. Taking a deep breath to calm her nerves, Pamela looked up at her audience again with a faint touch of a smile ghosting her lips. "Sorry. Harley tells me that I've got misplaced maternal issues or something."

"Why did you want to share this with me?" the caped crusader asked. "Harley Quinn aside, it sounds like this would be a matter better discussed with your psychiatrist." He was not about to admit

that there might be points of similarity in their respective situations, even to himself.

At least, not when anyone else was present.

"I sort of got sidetracked," Ivy admitted as she finished blotting her cheeks with a tissue - which ultimately ended up in the pitcher alongside her other material. She sighed. "I spent a lot of time in The Green and, in the end, they gave me a choice: stay there, or come back and try to do a better job of things. I don't know if coming back was the smart choice, but it seemed to me to be the right one. The reason I wanted to see you was to ask if you had a way of contacting the man I met; The Green seems to think that he has something I need."

Bruce kept his face outwardly unaffected, but inside he was more than a little worried. While he still lacked firm data to prove the existence of this 'Green' that Ivy referred to, having a second source speak of it seemed to provide at least circumstantial evidence towards its existence. "I will see if I can locate him and ask him to visit," Batman finally responded, "but don't expect an instant response."

This comment garnered a slow smile. "No worries there," Pamela answered in a satisfied manner. "If nothing else, The Green knows patience." Her hand caressed the pitcher, causing a small tendril of green to curl up from its depths and open a tiny leaf. "When you see him, please tell him it's a private matter of life and death."

She gestured to the pitcher and added, "And this is a gift for him. Please don't test it to the point that you kill it. No matter how resilient life is, new growth is always fragile."

Silence was her only response.

When Alfred's monitor alerted him to the return of his brooding charge, he made his way down to the Batcave, intent on recharging the used gear and preparing them for their next usage. Normally, by the time the distinguished butler reached the cave, Batman was already engrossed in some post-patrol task - such as entering notes and observations about the night's activities into the Batcomputer. In the event of a particularly intriguing case, the Dark Knight could be

found hard at work at one of the forensics stations, analyzing evidence gathered at the scene of a crime.

Tonight, however, he found a very focused individual staring almost angrily at what appeared to be a newly sprouted seedling enclosed in a bell jar.

"Taking up horticulture again, Sir?" Alfred inquired. His voice seemed to startle his employer, causing the gentleman's gentleman to frown slightly. It was very unlike the Batman to be so engaged in any matter that his awareness failed to register another person's proximity. "May I assume that Miss Isley is the source of your new plant, then?"

Gloved hands reached up and removed the sculpted cowl as Batman almost growled in response. "Ivy had an encounter with Mr. Black last week – as I mentioned – and apparently, he left an impression on her."

"One usually does not come away from a direct encounter with Death unchanged," Alfred reminded the man. "We are both certainly living examples of that truism in action." He studied the slip of vegetation in the bell jar, and considered the source for a moment. "Sir, I am certainly no botanist but that would seem to be some sort of rose, at least by the shape of the leaf. Is it...?"

"A seedling of a supposedly extinct species of wild rose?" Batman completed the question. "The Batcomputer is analyzing the DNA sequence right now but, given the source, I wouldn't place any bets on the matter just yet."

He shook his head tiredly. "Poison Ivy is in the Bio-isolation chamber at the University hospital. She has no access to any substances beyond the sterilized contents of that room and yet, while I watched her, she germinated this plant from a pitcher of water and substances from her own body. She was dangerous before, certainly, but her threat level has just gone up an entire order of magnitude."

"Miss Isley is hardly the only being on the planet with what seems to be a direct link to Nature herself," Alfred pointed out. "In fact, Gotham has encountered at least one other such being in the past.

Perhaps she was already on the path to such mastery and her encounter with Mr. Black merely hastened her strides."

"There are similarities," Bruce agreed, waving a hand towards a monitor that displayed a particular dossier - including a picture of a mossy green humanoid. "In fact, there is some indication that Swamp Thing only came into being after the apparent 'death' of one Alec Holland. In their sole recorded encounter, Alec referred to Pamela as the 'May Queen'. Perhaps he recognized a similar being mutating or evolving into a similar form." He shook his head to clear his thoughts. "Right now, there are too many questions and not nearly enough answers."

"Perhaps some rest might aid in this matter, Master Bruce? You have been - as usual - up much longer than is healthy for you, and that is counter-productive to any sort of investigative regime." The lifelong companion to the Wayne scion gestured at the bell jar. "If you place that in one of the secure sample vaults, I doubt that we will wake in the morning to find the Batcave overrun with a new floral decor. Not even the vicious kudzu could manage that level of growth overnight."

Knowing that his surrogate parent was only advocating a sensible direction, Bruce sighed. "Perhaps you're right, Alfred... as usual," he added with a touch of fondness. Picking up the container, he placed it into one of the sealed biological specimen cases and ensured that it would remain at normal atmospheric gas ratios. While he was at it, the detective programmed an alarm to continually monitor the plant for any unexpected chemical emissions.

As the cover sealed and the case's systems whirled to life, Bruce continued, "Hopefully the analysis will be complete by the morning and I'll know better whether I should do what Ivy requested and give that to Mr. Black."

"So Miss Isley has decided to gift Mr. Black with a flower?" Alfred mused. "One has to wonder just what response that will provoke in Miss Kara when she hears of this – not to mention the reactions of those other young women of his acquaintance you have mentioned."

There was an audible smirk in Batman's voice as he replied, "Should such information come to light, I believe that the confrontation will

prove most... amusing. I will have to ensure that the proper audience is present in the event I do turn this over to Mr. Black."

'Or if any copies of that accursed photo from Gorilla City ever surface,' he added mentally, envisioning the initial stage of a 'Black protocol'.

As the two made their way up to the mansion, the Batcave returned to its normal dim lighting. Unobserved by human eyes, the seedling quivered and a tiny new leaf budded on the slender stem.

A/N: Well, sports fans, this concludes Chapter Six of Terminal Justice. It's been a long time coming, and I hope you found it entertaining.

First, I would like to thank Philip and Chris for their terrific OMAKES that made their way into this chapter (namely, "Ivy Reborn" by Philip and "Who Said You Could?" by Chris). Additionally, I salute James, Chris, and Dorothy for their assistance with proofreading this chapter. Finally, thanks go out to all of you who contributed the inspiring suggestions that I incorporated into this chapter.

For those of you who are curious, Chapter Seven should include Gallatea's reintroduction to the League (and possibly a scene with Giganta). Additionally, I will cover the events of the TV episode "Patriot Act". Finally, for the individuals curious as to why I gave Harry the 'deep sea fishing boat'... well, he's just got some good out of it, but he's not quite done with it just yet.

I hope you found this latest submission to be worth the wait, and I await your reviews/suggestions/etc.

Previous Chapter
Terminal Justice

Chapter 6: So, Who Is He, Really?
by Overkill

Next Chapter

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Chapter 7: A Knight To Remember by Overkill

Next Chapter

Disclaimer: This is a cross between JLA (Season 5) and Rorschach's Blot's Make A Wish Story. Harry Potter is owned by JK Rowling and various publishers. Henchgirl, The Professor, and other such objects are Rorschach's creation. DC Comics own the Justice League and associated characters/plot devices. The lack of plot, however, can be attributed to me.

A Knight To Remember

"Henchgirl?" Harry spoke into his lit Zippo. "Henchgirl, are you there?"

"Right here, Mr. Black," the young female inventor answered groggily a few moments later. "There's not anything wrong with the flying charm, is there?"

"No, that spell works great," Harry reassured her. "Thanks a lot."

"You're welcome," she replied cheerfully. "So... what's up?"

"Oh, I just needed someone to talk to for a few minutes," the wizard announced. "I didn't wake you, did I?"

"It's alright," his friend replied. "It's about time for me to get up anyway. So, is everything okay?"

Harry pondered the question for a few moments. "I suppose," he finally announced. "I just had a strange run in with an even stranger woman."

"Really?" Henchgirl exclaimed. "Describe her."

"Well, I was riding along in my submarine and-"

"Ohh! You have a submarine? Can I see it? Huh? Can I?" the rumored-to-be-intelligent female interrupted. "I've always wanted to build a submarine, but the Professor won the coin toss so we built a zeppelin instead."

Harry blinked in confusion. "I suppose so..." he finally replied. "Can I send shrunk items to you?"

"Of course," she immediately answered in a manner that suggested it was obvious.

"Right, here it comes then," the wizard warned before stuffing the miniature USS Black through the portable Floo connection.

"Got it!" the young woman announced happily a few minutes later. "Awesome!" she cheered as she presumably inspected the vessel. "Can I keep it for a little while? I'll give it back, I promise!"

Harry paused for a moment before answering, "Well, I was sort of planning on-"

"I'll let you borrow my ship if you'll loan me your submarine!" she pleaded.

"Ship?" Harry inquired curiously.

"Oh, yeah," she admitted, "lots of people like building ships inside of glass jars. I thought that was somewhat silly, so I skipped that part. But I did build mine to be realistic; it's a replica of a Dutch flute ship that the old British navy named the Concorde."

"So, you built a full scale merchant ship – all by yourself?" Harry demanded incredulously.

"I was bored," Henchgirl admitted. "Anyway, I threw in the weather magic we used on the Zeppelin, tacked on a few extra gadgets, and added some extra weapons. The original design had thirteen cannons on each side - which I thought looked kinda weird, so I put twenty cannons on each side of my ship."

"Well, that sounds reasonable," Harry uttered while silently wondering what was strange about a thirteen cannon array. "Okay," he decided, "we have a deal."

"Yeah!" she celebrated. "Thanks a bunch! Here comes my boat," the witch warned.

"I'm ready," Harry promised. A moment later, a small and intricate wooden vessel lay in his hand. "This is some very fine craftsmanship, Henchgirl!" Harry praised.

"Oh, it was nothing," she said shyly. "So, what were you saying about this weirdo woman?"

"Well," Harry continued after switching mental gears, "she reminded me of some aquatic, depressed Veela to be honest. I met her about a hundred feet down in a lake off Britain, and she spoke really formally the whole time. She also had this nasty fixation on Divination and kept talking about destined champions and noble quests and all that rot."

Really?" the inventor questioned. "Did she give her name, or any details as to what she wanted?"

"Oh, yeah," Harry responded irritably. "She said her name was Viviane and she wanted to give me this sword called Caledfwich that apparently will help me do... something."

"Do what?" the inquisitive female demanded.

"How should I know?" Harry fired back. "She's a magical woman and you're a magical woman; I was hoping that you could tell me!"

"No, the name of the sword," Henchgirl corrected. "What did you call it?"

"Oh," Harry said sheepishly, "she called it Caledfwich. Does that mean anything to you?"

"I've definitely heard of it somewhere before," the brilliant witch admitted. "I just can't remember where. I'll research it and get back to you. In the meanwhile, don't let it eat on you. After all, it's not like it's a historically significant and easily recognized heirloom or something."

"You're right!" Harry agreed, much happier after their talk. "Thanks again."

"Anytime, Boss!" the blonde chirped happily before closing the connection.

"Hmm..." General Wade Eiling mused as he finished perusing the six-decade-old report detailing the 'Captain Nazi' super-soldier serum. According to the data captured by Spy Smasher during World War II, the elixir could enhance a normal human being's strength a hundred fold. Not only that, but the Nazi scientist theorized that the subject's skin would be impenetrable to all but heavy artillery fire. Although the original serum was never tested – thanks to Spy Smasher –, such scientific ingenuity was quite amazing even by contemporary standards.

"Very interesting..." he finally announced to no one in particular.

The alarm clock suddenly erupted, alerting Harry that it was time to rise. Crawling out of bed, the mage went through his typical morning ritual before escaping from his orbiting cabin and heading towards the commissary.

His relatively happy mood soured a bit when Harry discovered that the coffee was missing yet again. His heightened sense of smell informed him that precious brown fluid had been present recently, but he could catch no sign of its presence. Finally deciding that enough was enough, Harry felt that he should do something to counter this gross injustice.

Besides, he was bored and his schedule was clear for the day.

Sighing, Harry slipped his hand into his coat pocket and retrieved the Universal Remote that he had thus far been ignoring. He truthfully could not understand why anyone would want to 'power down' the universe – although watching an 'offed' sun reignite was pretty neat –, and he truthfully was slightly fearful of the ominous 'eject' feature. However, the device deserved a true field test and Harry could not devise a better trial than to assist him in solving the 'Case of the Disappearing Coffee'.

Discretely holding the device before him, Harry hit the 'Pause' button and watched as the world around him ground to a halt. Already liking this experience over his watch-turned-time-turner, the wizard pressed 'Seek Backwards' on the wondrous device and marveled at the Professor's ingenuity as he witnessed the entire world moving slowly in reverse.

Tapping his foot impatiently, Harry waited several minutes until the uniformed cafeteria personnel entered the room and replenished the buffet tables – including four of the delicious glass mugs that he so enjoyed. Granted, four mugs would only barely get him through the morning, but beggars could not be choosers.

Pausing time again, Harry wandered over to the table and quickly gathered the mugs before 'fast forwarding' back to the point in time when he first entered the commissary. Setting down his hard-won treasure with a satisfied sigh, Harry started to sip the grand black liquid, already feeling his dark mood lessening. Feeling much better despite the restless night, Harry summoned breakfast from the long table and started to enjoy the day.

Shutting off her communicator in a panic, Diana rushed to the cafeteria. As per her instructions, one of her informants had just tipped her off to another 'Code Black' in the commissary. Unfortunately, her preventative measures seemed inadequate as she burst in on the breakfasters just in time to see the java'd deity down his third 'mug' of the morning.

Dropping her shoulders in defeat, the Amazon turned around and retreated to the bridge to inform Mr. Terrific that Mr. Black would be indisposed for the next several hours.

Once she accomplished that task, the senior Leaguer gave in to the inevitable and returned to her cabin. It was past time to update the League's policy on dealing with Immortals anyway, and she could take the opportunity to include a strong warning on the negative consequences of contact with coffee or other caffeinated substances.

After all, it was not outside the realm of possibility that other immortals might decide to come 'slumming' – especially if they ever discovered a drink more potent than Ambrosia.

"You look well, General," Amanda Waller greeted after taking her seat. Having received a request to meet from her old coworker, the newly named liaison to the Justice League arranged to meet with the distinguished soldier in an out of the way restaurant. "It seems the past few months have been good to you," she acknowledged.

Eiling grimaced. "Mrs. Waller," he replied gruffly, "with all due respect, this reassignment is a joke. I never thought that I'd become a desk drone."

"I can't help you there," Amanda supplied promptly. "Langley's all but scrapped Project Cadmus and insisted on your transfer." She paused for a moment before adding in a pondering tone, "We're lucky we're not all in jail."

"Look, the only mistake we made was trusting Luthor," the general protested.

"Wade, you know better than to dwell on the past," Waller mildly chastised.

"I'm talking about right now," he insisted, rapping a fist on the table for emphasis. "The Justice League is still the single greatest threat to global security."

"I used to believe that, too," she admitted while dipping her head in regret, "but remember... we used to say the same about the Soviets. Our enemy is never as evil as we imagine... and maybe we're never quite as good."

"Nuts!" he groaned. "Don't tell me that the bleeding hearts in Congress got to you."

"I'd eat them alive," she fired back bemusedly.

"You would, too," Wade agreed while toasting her. "You've got some onions, Amanda," he complimented.

Waller smiled for a moment before growing serious. "Then listen to me," she pleaded. "I'm not the League's greatest fan, but their intentions are good. I can work with them."

Eiling, however, was not prepared to yield the point. "What if you're wrong, though?" he demanded. "If it turns out the metahumans aren't on the side of the Angels? We won't have any way to defend ourselves. Look what happened last year!" he added vehemently. "Superman walked into Cadmus and tossed our best men like a salad!"

"Oh, for heaven's sake!" Amanda retaliated while stifling a groan.

"What's to stop him from doing it again?" Wada pressed. "They're all orbiting us with a space weapon – supposedly decommissioned. That's a greater threat than the Russians ever were! If we rolled over like this for the Soviet Union... given up our nukes..."

"We'd all be living under a red flag," Waller finished irritably, her own ire rising.

"Yes, ma'am, you better believe it!" Eiling agreed vehemently. "After all our work, what did Cadmus really accomplish? You get a reprimand and I'm pushing pencils – and the League gets another base here on Earth... that Metro tower. When one side loses ground and the other side gains, that isn't a truce – it's surrender."

Amanda sighed resignedly and hauled herself to her feet. "It's a different world, General," she advised the man. As she began to leave, Waller added, "Learn to live in it!"

After Harry had finished his breakfast – with only four pitiful cups of coffee to accompany it –, the wizard reported to the command deck only to discover that his presence was not needed. Mr. Terrific was quite insistent on that point, despite what Harry could have sworn was a stack of missions requiring League attention.

Putting the strange event out of his mind, Harry took a stroll through the halls while he decided what he would do for the day. It was during his fourth pass by the shuttle bay that the wizard realized that he still had not delivered Jennifer's spell books. The wizard slapped himself upside the head before Apparating to the outskirts of the subterranean city to correct that oversight.

"Green Lantern, what's your status?" Mr. Terrific inquired over the long-distance radio.

"This sun's going nova any day now," the guardian reported. "It's worse than we thought. We'll have to deploy twice as many fusion dampeners!"

"You're breaking up!" the League coordinator replied as the signal began losing quality. "Say again."

"The main point is that this is going to take a while," Oa's champion summarized.

"Understood. We've got it covered on this end," the League's new controller replied. "Check in whenever you can. Watchtower out." Ending the long-distance communication, he opened the intercom channel and ordered, "Green Arrow, S.T.R.I.P.E., Stargirl, Vigilante, and Shining Knight – meet me on the bridge."

Once the quintet arrived, Mr. Terrific continued. "Half of our resources are in deep space and we're shorthanded."

"Great!" Pat Dugan said cheerfully. "I'll take a real mission over Watchtower duty any day!"

"So, who's left up here with you?" Oliver Queen inquired. "The Ray?"

"He's with Vixen, checking out an explosion in the Elusions," Terrific reported after checking his tablet computer. "Supergirl and Flash are unfinished in Madagascar."

"You're spreading us a little thin," the emerald archer noted.

"We go where we're needed, Green Arrow," the controller replied testily. "Did you second-guess the Martian like this?"

"Sorry - my bad," Oliver replied blithely, "you're the 'big picture' guy."

"I've got it all worked out," the other man said reassuringly. "I've just got this one mission in Metropolis and I need you people to fill in for Superman."

"Cool!" Courtney exclaimed.

The trip to Shambala was mostly uneventful – Harry found Jennifer easily enough. The only real rough spot during the entire operation was the strange smile that the girl kept up while in his presence. Harry thought that he had heard such a facial expression described as a 'sickly' smile once, but he could have been mistaken. In any event, the wizard found her habit of constantly eyeing him and keeping her back facing away from him to be somewhat offsetting and so decided cut his visit short as a result.

After ensuring that the girl understood the basics of the spell casting material, Harry made his excuses and left – but not before ensuring that his wards were still intact. Once that task was completed, the wizard noticed the late hour and realized that lunch seemed like a marvelous idea. A brief consultation with his abdomen later and it was decided that he would return to Superman's recommended burger joint. While he certainly wished that their sandwiches came in larger portions, the wizard most definitely enjoyed playing with the accompanied toy.

"I'd slay the ogre Blunderbore all over again rather than put myself on display in this manner," Sir Justin complained while waving from atop his mount, Winged Victory. While the crowd gathered to watch the annual Metropolis parade could not hear him from his position next to the city police float, his League teammates could unfortunately hear him all too well.

Still on a roll, Shining Knight continued. "Even though that ogre turned out to be-

"Morgan Le Fay!" all the other heroes chanted duly.

At Sir Justin's sharp look, the robotic S.T.R.I.P.E. commented, "We've all heard it."

"'Tis a good story," he protested.

Putting the topic of conversation behind her, Stargirl demanded, "So... what? Since we don't have super powers, it takes five of us to replace one Superman?"

One of the police officers stepped down from the float's upper tier. "Uh... excuse me, but I just wanted to thank you Justice League guys for showing up in force," the young man admitted. "It means a lot to us."

"Hey, we can't thank you enough," Green Arrow replied while shaking the officer's hand. "You're the real heroes."

"It's you the people come to honor," Shining Knight seconded.

"Great!" Courtney complained again quietly. "Now I'm petty!"

"See where it says 'Heroes one and all'?" Oliver asked while pointing to the banner on their float. "That's what it's all about. The crowd doesn't care who can bench-press a mountain, or shoot lasers out of their ears."

The crowd picked that moment to comment loudly in a vein disproving Oliver's supposition.

"Hey! Where's Superman?" one elderly female voice cried.

"How come none of the good ones are here?" another voice demanded rudely.

"I didn't come here to see some stupid cowboy!" a kid in the front row grumbled.

"I don't think Vigilante is a good role model," a man near the front of the pack voiced, "especially one with guns!"

"I came to see Superman!" an older voice called out in disappointment.

Courtney just sighed and continued to wave dutifully.

"General Eiling, Sir!" the attending soldier at the gate saluted smartly. "What brings you back to Cadmus?"

Wade Eiling rolled down the driver's window and smiled. "Just came to collect something I left behind," the balding military general replied. Returning the young soldier's salute, Eiling waited until the barricade was raised before shifting back to drive and continuing on to the facility.

The general entered what was once Cadmus's headquarters and proceeded to the uppermost levels uncontested – as he expected. What he did not expect, however, was for his high-level access codes to have been revoked from the ultra top security bioscience storage facility.

His concentration on the door's keypad was interrupted a few moments later by rushed footsteps and an insistent query, "General! What are you doing?"

Eiling looked up to find a white-coated scientist being escorted by an armed soldier. "Hello, Dr. Anderson," Eiling greeted. "I left my reading glasses in the bio-vault and can't seem to get back in."

Anderson made a show of inspecting the security keypad before looking suspiciously at the elder general. "That code was changed six months ago," the short man informed. "You're not authorized."

As the soldier began to discreetly draw his side arm, Eiling jumped into motion and caught the man off guard. A couple of quick punches to minimally guarded areas of the man's armor left him unconscious and Eiling holding his sidearm to Anderson's suddenly pale face.

"The new code – now!" Eiling growled.

Caving in to the obviously unstable general, Anderson used his security code to open the bio-vault. Eiling shoved the smaller man into the vault ahead of him and had the scientist open the inner door via an optical scanner. Once the two had access to the vault proper, Wade held his hostage at gunpoint while he retrieved his ultimate objective.

With a small smile of triumph, the intruder held aloft a loaded syringe – held in federal custody for over six decades.

"General! No! That serum's unstable!" Anderson pleaded from where he had landed on the floor.

"I read the report," Eiling replied bluntly.

"So you know about the horrible disfiguration?" the biology expert demanded as he regained his feet. "The test animals-"

The sudden presence of a pistol at his chest halted the scientist's monologue. However, the scientist received a sudden burst of bravery and dashed the remaining few feet to an alarm panel.

"Too late now," Eiling said grimly over the wailing of sirens and stampeding feet of the base's soldiers coming to full alert. Rolling back one sleeve, the general inserted the syringe into a vein and pushed the plunger.

As a squad of soldiers entered the unsecured bio-vault, the point man backed up in shock as Eiling's form began to expand and mutate. In a manner of seconds, the figure only barely resembled a man.

"Shoot to kill!" Anderson cried. "Now, while you still can!"

The soldiers replied with a hail of gunfire, but their efforts were in vain. The new metahuman's transformation had already completed and their arsenal had no effect on the hulking figure's gray skin.

Striding to an outside wall, the transformed Eiling easily punched through the concrete to provide an egress. One of the braver of the squad tried to sneak up on the monstrosity but failed – and soon found himself gripped around the torso with one gigantic hand.

"D-don't kill me," the man pleaded as he was held out over a ten-story drop.

"I'm not going to kill you, soldier," Eiling replied. "You're just doing your job." Tossing the man back inside, the creature took a gigantic leap and sailed out into the night sky.

"And now I'm going to do mine," he added to no one in particular.

After finishing the 'fast food' – a term Harry still could not comprehend, seeing as how it took nearly twenty minutes to obtain – the wizard decided to explore the western end of Metropolis. Throwing away his meal's refuse – and carefully pocketing the plastic action figure –, Harry left the restaurant and walked through the maze of streets that was Metropolis. Ultimately, his exploration landed Harry in the old business district where his senses were assaulted by a series of strange smells and odd sights.

Feeling a sudden onset of déjà vu, Harry pushed the door open and entered what appeared to be a large curio shop.

"Hello, Mr. Black!" a short man behind the counter called out as Harry entered.

The wizard in question jerked his head in the other man's direction and glared at the source of the interjection. "Bloody shopkeepers,"

he cursed under his breath. In a louder tone, Harry nearly growled, "Shopkeeper, I wonder what the chances are that I get kicked to the other side of the multi-verse only to run into one of you people again! How many cousins do you have, man?"

"I admit, we are one of the larger families of old," the shopkeeper replied.

"I'll say," Harry grumbled to himself while silently cursing Cassandra's reproductive tendencies. "So why am I here?" he demanded of the man after a few moments of silence.

"I'm sorry?" the man asked innocently. "Whatever do you mean?"

"Don't you think it an amazing coincidence that I land clear in another dimension, start wandering in one of the largest cities in the world, and just so happen to stumble upon yet another one of Cassandra's many... many spawn?" Harry demanded crossly.

"Definitely strange," the man replied in a suddenly nervous fashion. "I mean, I'm just here to meet this dimension's more... arcane needs, after all. Yeah, that's right. Just an honest job. Hehehe."

"And I suppose that you're planning on sending me on a wild goose chase or twenty as well?" Harry queried sharply.

"Of course not!" the shopkeeper said shakily. "No questing stuff here," he added while kicking a bag further underneath the counter. "Just the common everyday items: potion ingredients, invisibility cloaks, black dragonhide gauntlets that contain magical cores to allow for hands-free spell casting and sub-dimensional pockets to contain unlimited weaponry, brass cauldrons..."

"Wait!" Harry interrupted. "What was that last bit?"

"Oh, the brass cauldrons?" the man inquired helpfully. "Size 2 with extra thick bottoms; great for brewing-"

"No, before that!" Harry stated irritably.

"Oh!" he said in an enlightened tone. "The battle mage gauntlets. Some wizard who liked fighting hand-to-hand with both spells and steel made them a few centuries back. He stashed his swords,

knives, staffs, and whatnot in the gloves and could call any weapon to hand instantly with no more than a thought. Made spell casting a whole lot easier too – or so I've been told."

"Sounds useful," Harry grudgingly admitted. "Why hasn't someone purchased them already?"

"Did I mention that the wizard was a Parselmouth," the old man asked while grinning smugly, "and charmed them so they would only work for another Parselmouth?"

"How... convenient," Harry said through gritted teeth. "And just how much would such a... unique pair of items cost me?"

"Oh, for such old items as these...?" the other man asked in a satisfied manner. "I could just let you have them – I'm not likely to find anyone else that can use them, after all – but..."

Harry sighed. "But...?"

"Well...", the man hesitated, "there are these maps, you see..."

"I knew it!" Harry growled.

"Hey, there're just old maps," the man protested. "It's not like you'd have to go search out Avalon and discover their forgotten healing and shapeshifting techniques or anything."

"Shapeshifting?" Harry queried despite himself. The Animagus book he had read the previous day had briefly discussed how the ancient mages could assume most any form but went on to explain that such knowledge had been lost to the ravages of time.

"Oh, yes," the man nodded rapidly, "the Avalonians were talented in many areas, but especially in Shapeshifting. The legends say that some Avalonians could change into any form they wished - be it animal or person, unlike today's limited Metamorphmagi and Animagi."

"I see..." Harry deliberated, privately intrigued at this new route of following in the Marauders' footsteps. "How much?"

"Let's say... ten galleons for the maps and gauntlets," the man decided.

Harry nodded sharply. "Done," he agreed before passing over the coins. Grabbing the bag containing Avalon's location and his new accessories, Harry left the shop. Stepping into an adjacent alley, Harry quickly slid on the dragonhide bracers and began stowing his weaponry. Once he had transferred his arsenal, the wizard willed Major Black's sword to appear. As the shopkeeper promised, the desired implement of destruction immediately slid into his hand.

Smiling cheerfully, Harry pointed his other hand at some scattered trashcans and tried to wordlessly levitate them – which also worked... after a fashion. The waste receptacles did indeed leave the ground – that much was certain. Unfortunately, his new protective gear seemed to pack quite a magical kick as the aforementioned containers took off like lit bottle rockets.

Wincing as he heard a suspicious noise – where 'suspicious noise' is the arbitrary definition of the racket one would achieve by sending several metal containers colliding at high velocity into an automobile equipped with an alarm system several blocks away - Harry pointed at another piece of debris and tried again. This time, Harry consciously tried to limit the amount of magic he was channeling with great success. In fact, this method resulted in absolutely no property damage.

Harry's smile widened further as he summarized his new purchases with one word.

"Wicked!"

Courtney set off another batch of fireworks from her staff to the accompaniment of cheering from the crowd. Once the last sparkles faded, she flew back down to hover near Vigilante.

"Stargirl, ladies and gentlemen," the cowboy called out in a showman's voice, "the All-American sweetheart."

"Wow!" Courtney congratulated the masked hero. "You really know how to work a crowd."

"Shoot!" he said easily, "If I had brought my guitar, I'd have 'em eating out of my hand." Throttling his motorcycle, Vigilante sped up to where Shining Knight was riding his horse.

"And what have you got to say to the Shining Knight?" Vigilante called out to the crowd. "Sir Justin's a real live knight from back in the times of King Arthur and them!"

While the crowd chattered in awe to one another, Justin mentioned - in a low voice -, "Friend, I am no mare at auction."

As the knight made to pass the cowboy, Vigilante slapped the winged mount – causing the horse to take to the skies. "How about Sir Justin's horse, Winged Victory? And his magical sword, given to him by Merlin the magician himself."

Justin sighed at the over-the-top introduction but drew the enchanted blade for the crowd's inspection regardless – to the accompaniment of more cheering. Before the cowboy could continue his speech, however, the festivities were interrupted by a hulking gray figure plummeting out of the sky. The humanoid form collided with the Justice League's float, causing the civilians to scatter and the leaguers to prepare for battle.

"Freeze!" one of the police officers ordered while leveling his pistol in a two-handed grip at the monster in their midst. The rest of the police force encircled the creature and followed suit.

"I'd listen to the man," Green Arrow seconded as he readied an arrow.

"Where's Superman?" Eiling demanded while casually holding a giant piece of the destroyed float over his head.

"Busy," Oliver rejoined sarcastically, "can I help you?"

"Yeah," Wade rebutted, "hold this for me." The gathered heroes scattered as several hundred pounds of wood was suddenly lobbed where they had been standing moments before. Courtney tried to catch the projectile with her staff but failed and was buried in the rubble.

"Open fire!" the police captain ordered. The officers followed the command – to no obvious effect.

"Go ahead, boys, pour it on," Eiling boasted. "I can take it!" The League joined their efforts to that of the police department's in the form of a hail of arrows, missiles, bullets, and a charging knight sweeping down from the sky.

The unnatural juggernaut met the latter threat with a hail of thrown cars that, although failing to hit Sir Justin directly, managed to get rid of him all the same when the knight hurried to rescue the individuals in harm's way.

A small group of kids joined the resistance by throwing rocks and other bits of debris at the hulking monster. "Take off, ya big wuss!" one of the braver children called as he lobbed a broken piece of lumber.

Vigilante caught sight of them, however, and came running to cover them.

"Where's your parents?" the cowboy demanded.

"I don't know," one of the boys answered. "Run off, I guess."

Vigilante knelt down and got their attention. "Listen, I need you fellers to do a very important job," he informed, "so you're all my deputies." He threw one hand towards a group of gawking civilians at the edge of the battlefield and ordered, "Now go ride herd on that crowd and get them to somewhere safe!"

"Yes, sir!" they shouted before racing off to do their new errand.

The cowboy rejoined the fray just as the behemoth charged a group of police officers. "I mean it!" the creature interjected. "Get Superman and tell him that General Wade Eiling wants a word with him!"

"Eiling?" Green Arrow echoed. "Cadmus?"

"What happened?" S.T.R.I.P.E. demanded. "That beat down you got last year leave you with Superman issues?"

Eiling reached out and encompassed the robot with one hand, then slammed the other figure into the ground. "He's your poster boy," the creature supplied. "I'm gonna show the Justice League that you're not the only superpower on the block, that there's someone who can stop you. I'm here to protect them from you!"

Dugan broke free from Eiling's grip and rocketed into the sky before reversing his direction and charging towards the monster. Unfortunately, Eiling leaped into the air and caught the robot with a vicious punch, the shockwave from which breaking several of the nearby windows and created several more hazards for the people on the ground.

Green Arrow ducked out of the way of the barrage and keyed his communicator for the Watchtower. "Mr. Terrific, we need backup!"

"Everybody's in play somewhere else," the controller replied. "Everybody. I'll see if I can scrounge a few reserve Leaguers."

The archer huffed in irritation and rejoined the fight, which mostly consisted of an aerial battle between the monster and the robot – with the robot taking most of the damage. Eiling finally managed to knock S.T.R.I.P.E. to the ground and proceeded to pound the suit to pieces. "I'll give you issues," the monster growled as he peeled back the armored plating and prepared to deliver a punch to Dugan's unprotected torso.

Fortunately for the Leaguer, however, a rather large wrecking ball suddenly interrupted Eiling's plan. One of Vigilante's 'deputies' had apparently snuck into the adjacent construction site and succeeded in activating the heavy duty equipment. Before the child could make another pass, however, Eiling had recovered and was attempting to remove the demolition crane's supports.

Dugan recovered enough to fire his suit's jets and body check the juggernaut before he could do anymore damage. Regrettably, Eiling had already wrought considerable destruction and the support beams gave way, sending the juvenile operator sailing out of the cab and into a steep plummet.

Vigilante had noticed this impending catastrophe, however, and reacted accordingly. Revving his bike, the cowboy shot up an impromptu ramp – namely, a large piece of debris - and jumped the

construction yard's wreckage just in time to snag the boy before he hit the ground.

While Vigilante took his cargo out of danger's path, S.T.R.I.P.E. and his stepdaughter - who had finally recovered from her earlier mishap - tried to keep the titan at bay. Unfortunately, their efforts proved no more effective than before. The cowboy saw this and, once his errand was complete, rode straight for the creature. Timing the maneuver precisely, he called out to Courtney to get clear. As soon as she complied, Vigilante leaped off the speeding motorcycle. As the abandoned vehicle approached Eiling, Vigilante drew both pistols and fired into its fuel tank – creating an explosion powerful enough to knock the monstrosity off its feet and give S.T.R.I.P.E. and Stargirl some breathing room.

Having experimented with the array of features on his new gauntlets in the vacant alleys, Harry was preparing to Apparate back to the Watchtower when a large explosion caught his attention. Looking around, the wizard sighted columns of smoke emanating from the other side of town. Summoning all of his weapons back to their new holsters, the newest League member mounted his pet Pooka and took flight towards the source of the disturbance.

Eiling climbed back to his feet. "Ya lousy bush Leaguers," he cursed. "I'm running out of patience!"

"You, too?" Courtney demanded cockily. Wrapping the creature in an energy lasso, the heroine lifted Eiling into the air. "We're taking this somewhere else! Haven't you ever heard of innocent bystanders?"

"Ever hear of 'acceptable losses'?" he replied. "You can't make an omelet without breaking a few eggs. This country's halfway down the toilet because of you super-powered types."

"For the record," Courtney stated, "I don't have powers, Potty Mouth! It's the staff."

Hearing everything he needed, Eiling grabbed the glowing cord and used it to sling Stargirl into a downward arc. Once she struck the ground and lost her concentration, Eiling's bonds disappeared and he came crashing back to terra firma. Grabbing her by her head and

lifting her off the ground, Eiling growled, "In that case, Miss, you're just another egg."

"Face, Villain!" Shining Knight cried as he swooped in with drawn sword. "Have you no shame?" Jumping from his winged mount, Sir Justin managed to slice the monster's forearm with his enchanted blade.

The damage was minimal, however, and only served to make himself the brute's target. Eiling punched Sir Justin with the damaged arm and sent the knight crashing into a nearby building.

While his back was turned, Vigilante and Green Arrow rearmed themselves and jumped back into the fight. "You hit him high – I'll hit him low," Vigilante offered.

"Whatever!" Arrow growled in response as another barrage of arrows and bullets were launched. As before, their attack succeeded only in drawing Eiling's attention – which took the form of a powerful stomp, generating flying debris and demolished street pavement.

"Vig!" Oliver called out when he saw the cowboy failing to rise from the last assault.

"Found your reinforcements, G.A.," Mr. Terrific's voice said over the League's communication link. "I'm teleporting them in now."

"Got that," Oliver replied, "Thank's, T." Turning to the waiting Eiling, the archer yelled, "Well, you wanted Superman. Now you got..." the blurred figures resolved, "the Crimson Avenger and my ex-sidekick?" The archer uttered the latter part with disbelief.

"Ex-partner!" Speedy corrected shortly.

"Speedy," Oliver cut in, "do we have to do this now?"

"Whoo, now I'm scared!" Wade Eiling said sarcastically. Crimson Avenger answered the retort with a stream of tear gas, which actually affected the monster for a few moments – before the creature clapped his hands together with enough force to dispel the cloud and sent the trio off their feet from the resulting shockwave.

"Ollie," Speedy asked as Eiling approached their position, "how many guys has he taken out?"

"That would be all of them," Green Arrow answered as the two archers began pelting the advancing figure with arrows.

"You spoiled rich little twerp," Eiling growled.

"I think he means me," Oliver quipped.

"Oh," Speedy countered, "for a second, I was all mad."

"Still got your quantum arrow?" Oliver asked as the two exhausted their quivers' supplies.

Speedy looked over his shoulder and answered, "Yeah, but you said—"

"This is an emergency!" Green Arrow interrupted, drawing the last arrow from behind his back. The two archers launched the quantum bolts in tandem, forming an energy bolo as the two arrows flew towards their target. The weapons connected, erupting in a blinding explosion that sent both humans off their feet and covered 'ground zero' in a dust cloud.

As they watched to see what effect this latest assault had, the two were dumbstruck as Eiling came waltzing out of the fog apparently unaffected by their combined attack.

"We are so dead!" Speedy finally announced.

"Could be," Green Arrow admitted. The two archers began a desperate charge forward, but were grabbed by Eiling's superior reach and casually flung into two parked cars.

"Superman, you coward!" the behemoth bellowed. "All your men are down and you won't even show your face!"

"He cannot hear even your bellowing, Monster!" Sir Justin called out as he limped through the rubble. "As we speak, Superman rescues an entire star system a universe away. Do your worst," the knight challenged, "for I will not let you harm another."

"I do what I do in service to my country," Eiling countered.

Shining Knight brought his sword to attention and continued, "Once, at the word of my Lord King Arthur, I was ordered to lay waste to an entire village. I knew my king's heart could not be so unjust, so I spared them all."

"Then you're a lousy soldier," Eiling accused and punched the knight back a dozen paces.

"There it is," Sir Justin gasped, "the creeping moral decay of the past thousand years."

He unsteadily charged forward again while swinging his sword, but Eiling easily dodged the strike.

"Arthur thanked me, oaf!" the armored warrior spat. "Had I been wrong, I would have handed over my sword and left the court in shame."

He charged forward again sword first, but the crude mockery of a man caught the blade and used it to sling Justin several feet away from him.

"Save yourself a hospital stay," Eiling grumbled as he stalked towards the slowly rising knight, "and stand down. That magic armor won't help you."

"Perhaps not, but I will," a cold voice announced right before a red bolt of light slammed into Eiling and flung him a hundred yards. Harry jumped off the descending Pooka's back and helped the knight back to his feet. Recognizing the man from the League's member reports, Harry greeted, "Well met, Sir Justin. If I may...?"

Before the bruised knight could utter a word, the wizard had already cast a basic healing charm. Feeling much better, the Shining Knight looked at his rescuer's face and the accompanying ghostly stallion and asked, "Who are you, strange Sir Knight? Do I know you?"

"You might, Sir Justin," Harry replied. "My name is Black." Catching Eiling slowly stalking towards them again, Harry hit the creature with a Reductor curse – which did a much more admirable job of keeping the behemoth down than his previous Banishing charm. Just for

spite, he flicked one hand and levitated the figure off the ground to prevent it from escaping. Turning back to the slack-jawed knight, Harry asked, "What has happened here?"

"That rogue assaulted our party and indulged in knavish actions," Shining Knight replied in disgusted tones. "The seven of us have been trying to subdue the fiend without success."

Harry suddenly caught sight of Courtney's battered form lying on the ground and Apparated to her side. Seeing her chest still rising and falling regularly – if a trifle tenderly –, Harry let out the breath he was holding and cast the same healing charm on her that he had used on the knight. As her eyes opened and she struggled to rise, Harry picked her up and carried her to where Green Arrow and the remaining Leaguers were congregating while gesturing with his head for the armored man to join them.

"Thanks," the blonde girl in his arms said weakly. Her eyes suddenly widened as her mind assimilated the last few minutes of the battle. "Wait! My father... is he-?"

"I will tend to him, Courtney," Harry said reassuringly. "Just wait here."

"Thank you, T!" Green Arrow cheered. "We've needed a heavy hitter! Where've you been?"

Harry looked mildly confused. "The other side of town," the wizard answered, "having lunch and doing some shopping."

Several of the others seemed incredulous. "Didn't Mr. Terrific call your communicator?" Arrow demanded.

"What communicator?" Harry asked blankly as he helped Courtney to stand on her own.

The emerald archer suddenly smacked himself in the face. "You mean... we've had a super-strong magic user in our back pocket and have been gettin' our butts handed to us... all because some genius forgot to give you a freakin' walkie talkie?"

Harry just looked at the man with a slight smile and nodded once. "It's nice to meet you gentlemen," the wizard directed towards

Vigilante, Crimson Avenger, and Speedy, "but I promised the little lady that I'd check in with the walking refrigerator."

"Our comrade lies in yonder refuse," Sir Justin informed the wizard while gesturing to the demolition site behind them.

"Right," Harry acknowledged, "back in a sec." The mage Apparated out of sight - much to the disbelief from the Leaguers not yet 'in the know'.

"Ollie... who was that?" Speedy asked slowly.

"That, Speedy, is Mr. Black," Green Arrow supplied. "Imagine the offspring of Batman and Wonder Woman with a little Zatanna thrown in, and you've pretty much got him pegged."

"Ah... got ya," Speedy nodded warily while watching the strange man's destination. A sudden snort from behind them caused several of the gathered heroes to start. "What in the world is that?" the youthful bowman demanded while pointing at Mortis, who had also joined the party without anyone noticing.

"Oh, that's Mortis," Courtney supplied easily. "He's Mr. Black's ghost horse."

"And why's that old curly wolf got hisself a dead horse?" Vigilante demanded while looking over the creature.

"Maybe because he's the Grim Reaper, and a pale ghost horse is part of the deal?" she suggested sarcastically.

"Say again?" Green Arrow demanded. "I think I lost something in the translation."

"Mr. Black is the personification of Death," the girl said slowly. "We were on a mission a few days ago and I saw him with the hooded robe and scythe and everything."

"Still," Sir Justin spoke up, "just because a man wields an unusual weapon does not necessarily indicate a supernatural origin. In fact, I once knew a great knight who wielded all forms of weaponry including the scythe." The knight's pallor seemed to fade.

"What is it, partner?" the cowboy asked when Sir Justin failed to continue.

"The knight I speak of served only the people and bowed to no king," Shining Knight said in reply. "Unlike the many brigands who cowardly blackened their devices before engaging in savagery, this legendary knight bore no markings because of his pledge to guard all peoples, not merely a province. It was even suggested by some that he possessed supernatural powers, for he was never defeated in battle."

"So...?" Green Arrow prompted. "What's your point?"

"He was known only as the Black Knight," Sir Justin explained.

"Uh huh," Oliver said. "Gotcha."

"I think that there hard case done hit you upside the head once too many," Vigilante exclaimed. "Just 'cause he's got magic powers and a ghost horse don't make him the danged Grim Reaper or some long-dead legendary knight."

"Perhaps, friend," Sir Justin allowed, "but I feel something familiar about the fellow."

Reappearing in the construction lot, Harry found the white robotic figure quickly. Seeing Pat's chest still moving regularly encouraged the wizard to hit Pat with the same healing charm that had proven so effective with the others.

The incumbent machine began to twitch as Pat's voice came over the speaker. "Mr. Black...? I was wondering if I'd see you. So... am I dead yet?"

Harry shook his head. "Sorry to disappoint, my friendly overgrown toaster, but you're very much alive. Your daughter sent me to check up on you."

"You've seen Courtney?" the mecha repeated and seemed to tense. "She's not dead... is she?"

"No," Harry replied with a smile, "she's quite alive as well. I've already seen to the others' injuries so let's get you operational, shall we?"

Dugan looked at the diagnostic displays. "I can't. That monster's crippled most of my systems – the repairs will take days to have me running again."

Harry smiled mischievously. "I was thinking of something a little faster," he admitted to the other man before hitting the suit with a silent *Reparo*. The older man watched in amazement as pieces of his fractured battle armor flew to him and reattached themselves. As each new piece jumped back into place, the mecha pilot could observe his status displays progressively clear the warnings. In a few moments, his operating system informed him that the suit was in optimal condition.

"I... think that did it," Dugan finally responded. "How did you do that?"

Harry just shrugged. "It was just a simple little trick - hardly awe inspiring."

As the robotic suit regained its footing, Pat Dugan could not help but disagree with the wizard's assessment.

Harry began walking and beckoned the other man to follow him. "Shall we meet up with the others, then?" The pair walked back over to the League's congregation. "Alright," Harry started once everyone had gathered around, "now that everyone's present and accounted for... what exactly happened here?"

"Well, that guy," Oliver pointed over at the thrashing gray giant with the scorched hole in his chest, "used to be a General Wade Eiling from Cadmus."

"Funny," Harry said idly while watching as the person in question flailed his limbs helplessly, "I always pictured him as being more... human."

"Yeah... we're not sure what's up with that," the archer agreed. "Anyway, he comes barging in here, throws stuff around, and keeps yelling for Superman to come face him."

"Didn't you tell him that Big Blue is out of the solar system at the moment?" the wizard inquired.

"Indeed," Sir Justin confirmed, "however, the knave's strategy seems to be putting the innocent in harm's way until Superman reveals himself."

"Really...?" Harry drew out menacingly. "And why does he want to see Superman so badly?"

"Apparently, to save all these people from the nasty metahumans," Courtney muttered sarcastically.

Harry looked confused. "I didn't think any of you were a metahuman," he finally offered.

"That doesn't seem to make much of a difference where he's concerned," Green Arrow noted while jerking a thumb in Eiling's direction.

"I see...," the wizard acknowledged before summoning his newest sword from its wrist-mounted housing. Once the blade was in his hand, however, it began to glow again. "That's quite enough of that, thank you very much!" Harry chastised the weapon before forcing it to stop illuminating.

"Sorry about that," he told the others while they were rubbing their eyes, "I think the crazy thing wants to be a torch when it grows up or something. Anyway," the wizard continued, "do any of you mind if I cut in?" he asked suggestively.

"Please... be our guest," Oliver Queen offered with a grandiose bow.

Harry bowed his head in reply. "Thank you," he verbalized before instructing the patiently waiting Pooka to search the wreckage for trapped survivors. With that chore delegated, the wizard spun on his heels and strode towards the suspended gray menace.

"That was my Lord King Arthur's sword, I am sure of it!" the Shining Knight exclaimed as the other man passed out of hearing range.

"That was Excalibur?" Speedy questioned eagerly, simultaneously showing his fascination of the medieval legend.

"Nay, my young friend," Sir Justin disagreed, "though some folk have called it such. The true Excalibur was broken by my Lord in battle, whereupon Merlin the Enchanter took Arthur to the Lady of the Lake. At Merlin's behest, she bestowed upon him a new weapon for a time. Upon being mortally wounded, Arthur ordered the blade returned to the Lady until one worthy of its power came to claim it. Apparently, Sir Black is such a man."

"But if this Mr. Black has it... does that mean that he's the new Arthur or something?" the youthful bowman pressed.

"I am... unsure as to his true identity," the knight admitted. "I will admit a passing resemblance between our new comrade and my Lord, however. It is most intriguing that he greeted me in the manner of old friends as well."

"I suspect that both his and that sword's origin goes much further than that," Pat Dugan commented as he kept watch on their 'backup'.

The others seemed unable to follow his train of thought. "What do you mean, my friend?" Sir Justin inquired.

"Do you remember the accounts of the Garden of Eden?" the mecha inquired. "Specifically, the events following the Fall of Man?"

"Verily," the knight replied, "why do you..." The armored man blinked repeatedly before continuing, "Surely you jest..."

"What?" Courtney demanded.

"The Bible details what happened after Adam and Eve were exiled from Eden," Pat answered his stepdaughter's inquiry. "After their banishment was executed, God placed a cherub with a flaming sword to guard the way to the Tree of Life to prevent any human from returning."

"Umm..." the young girl hesitated, "in that case, wouldn't it – and he - still be there?"

"Good point," Green Arrow noted.

"Not necessarily," the robotic suit disagreed. "According to the Eastern Orthodox tradition, the flaming sword was removed from the Garden of Eden after the birth of Christ to make it possible for humanity to re-enter Paradise."

"What are you saying?" the archer demanded. "That this immortal guardian got laid off from his security job, then decided to loan his sword to King Arthur and take up soul reaping for a hobby? Be serious!" he chastised. "I mean, that's pushing it even by our standards!"

"Well, the people of my time did consider the Lady's sword a gift from Heaven," Shining Knight admitted. "Truly, it was a weapon of unmatched power."

"Well, whoever he is, he's fixin' to get into it with that coyote," Vigilante interrupted while pointing. "Shouldn't we be rustlin' up a plan?"

"Truthfully, my friend, be he the Black Knight or someone even more distinguished, that rogue poses no threat to a warrior of his caliber," Shining Knight declared.

"All the same," Green Arrow decided, "we should probably stay on hand." He jogged off to join the wizard, inviting the others to do likewise.

Harry casually walked up to the invisibly suspended Eiling and said, "So, you'd be the hypocritical git Wade Eiling, then?"

"Let me down from here and I'll shake your hand," the gray figure growled.

"In a minute," Harry promised. "Now, first things first. I hear that you've been looking for Superman. Why?"

"Superman and your Justice League are a threat to a safe and stable world," Eiling stated as he renewed his attempts to escape his intangible prison. "Now let me go."

"So," Harry mused humorously, "you think that killing Superman will keep the world safe?" He made a show of looking around at the

wary crowd and large-scale property damage. "I'm curious... how does harming these innocent people fit in with your plan for global security?"

"They're just collateral damage," Eiling replied. "I'm not the menace – the metahumans are! Super-powered beings."

Harry nodded indulgently. "I see. Well, this section of town seems to be pretty well trashed, and the only 'super-powered beings' around here are the two of us – and I just got here."

"He has a point," Oliver Queen quipped as the others approached.

"In this world, power is the only thing that matters," Eiling directed towards the blonde archer. "You and these other no-named heroes... you're just people. In the great scheme of things, nothing you do has the least bit of significance."

"I've heard this spiel before, and it's just as invalid now as it was then," Harry said darkly while memories of Voldemort's taunts on the pursuit of power filled his mind. "Power is merely a means to an end, not an end itself."

The wizard paused for a second before speaking again, his voice even more intense than before. "And you're wrong, you know," Harry informed the man seriously. "These seven may have been born without superhuman abilities... but they possess a strength you sorely lack. Despite the overwhelming odds and the very real likelihood of their own demise, they chose to do what was right instead of what was easy. And that kind of power, Wade Eiling, can change the world."

"I'll waste you and a billion like you," Eiling bellowed, "before I let any power rival America's!"

Harry sighed at the evident lost cause. "No, you won't," he answered quietly and released Eiling's bonds. "Since you refuse to listen to reason, we'll do this the old-fashioned way. You wanted a fight to the finish against a freakishly strong opponent; you shall have one."

The wizard gave the drawn sword a little wave. "Shall we?"

As the behemoth charged forward, Harry whipped his sword in an upward arc before sheathing it in his gauntlet. Eiling stopped short of ramming the group and stared at the wizard in confusion for a moment before his eyes lost focus. A thin line of crimson blossomed on the creature's countenance, spanning from its left ear, across the cheek, and finally ending near the neck on the other side. Fully half of the monster's skull slid off an instant later, creating a morbid thud as it contacted the ground. The rest of Eiling's body remained erect for a moment more, then toppled backward to land with a crash amid the blood and debris.

"I think President Abraham Lincoln said it best," Pat Dugan said through his robotic faceplate. "'Nearly all men can stand adversity, but if you want to test a man's character, give him power.'"

"Well," Harry finally offered, "I guess he failed, then."

A sudden arrival of three large transport helicopters in the distance preempted any reply to Harry's painfully obvious observation.

"Great!" Oliver complained. "What now?"

The three aircraft flew over the group before two of their number circled back. Throwing open their doors, the vessels began disgorging armed troops. These soldiers rapidly secured the area, both by keeping the crowd back and keeping a close eye on the Leaguers and their recently deceased adversary. After a few moments, one of the more decorated troopers reported into a communications unit and, after a short exchange, the third helicopter landed. One of the closest troopers rolled back the door to reveal a short, dark-skinned woman disembarking from the transport.

"Waller, too?" the blonde archer rhetorically demanded. "Oh, this just keeps gettin' better and better!"

"I think, my friend, that you spoke too soon," Shining Knight counseled. Following the armored hand to the source of his comment, the gathered heroes watched as an older version of Kara In-Ze followed the much shorter woman out of the helicopter.

"This is just peachy!" Courtney complained. "Another round with Miss 'I'm gonna trash your space station' is just what we need!"

"Look on the bright side," Vigilante commented, "at least their critters ain't shootin' us."

The two women approached the other group with their 'guard' in tow. Amanda Waller shot a seemingly disappointed look at Eiling's remains before turning her attention to the Leaguers closely eyeing her escort.

Before any of the new arrivals could speak, however, Courtney decided to start venting. "So, I guess that Cadmus is still playing with genetic engineering, huh, Waller? Is the fact that your latest plaything went berserk why you brought this failed science project back to life?" she demanded insultingly with a sharp nod in the taller blonde-haired woman's direction.

"Stargirl, enough!" Harry barked. Once the other teenager seemed to have regained control of her tongue, the wizard turned his attention to the insulted duo. "First things first," he instructed while holding out his hand to the short woman. "My name is-"

"Mr. Black," Waller interrupted confidently. "D.C.'s been hearing a lot of... interesting things about the League's newest addition. I am-"

This time Harry interrupted. "Amanda Waller, former head of Project Cadmus and current Director of the Department for Metahuman Affairs. I've received a lot of... disconcerting information about you as well."

Leaving the politician to ponder for a moment, Harry turned his attention to the other woman. "And you must be Gallatea," the wizard continued, "Kara's... sister."

"You mean 'clone'?" the woman asked irritably.

Harry shrugged. "Just because your existence began in an unusual manner doesn't mean that the two of you aren't sisters. And, just between us," he added, "my upbringing wasn't exactly traditional either."

"Shall we get to the matter at hand, then?" Waller prompted none-too-subtly. "What happened here?"

"Eiling showed up looking like this approximately ten minutes ago," S.T.R.I.P.E. replied. "He immediately engaged us and, as a result, endangered the lives of the gathered civilians. His stated goal was the elimination of all metahumans; I believe that he intended this ordeal to lure Superman to his demise."

"I see," she offered a few minutes later. Turning to one of the attending soldiers, Waller briefly ordered, "Get him out of here." Returning her attention to the group, the squat director demanded, "So... who gave him the haircut?"

"That would be me," Harry admitted. "He was completely out of control, totally irrational, and posed a significant threat to numerous innocent lives – so I stopped him."

"I was under the impression that the serum he illegally obtained would have made him invulnerable to most physical attacks," she noted idly.

Harry just shrugged, unconcerned. "I have a lot of experience with stopping overpowered psychopaths. Besides, my associates here wore him down beforehand, so I was able to take him down without much fuss."

A loud whinny drew the wizard's attention towards the wreckage. Mortis was standing in front of ruined van and stamping his front hoof at a large piece of debris lying atop the vehicle.

Realizing what the Pooka was indicating, Harry stretched out one hand and Vanished the rubble. Now that the trapped occupants were revealed, the wizard hit the side of the automobile with another Vanishing charm to create an egress for the entrapped family.

The Pooka gave a reassuring snicker before continuing his reconnaissance duty.

Chore finished, Harry turned back to the others and cleared his throat to gain their attention.

"So," Green Arrow continued a few moments later, "what exactly brings the former Director of Cadmus way out here? I didn't take you for a field general, too."

"Besides ensuring that General Eiling's actions did not lead to a major catastrophe?" the dark-skinned woman responded. "I have a... request of the League to make."

"And that would be...?" the archer prompted.

"We have finished removing the... conditioning that once plagued Gallatea, and both her physical and psychological rehabilitation is complete," she answered. "I wanted to present my request – in person – for the League to consider inducting her. Think of it as a chance to redeem her self."

"Right..." Oliver drawled sarcastically, "and if her mind job is as bad the number you did on Doomsday and she decides to blow us to bits again?"

Shining Knight looked contemplative. "If the maiden was truly ensorcelled," he finally decided, "then it would be unjust to hold her accountable for the actions of another."

"Darn tootin'!" Vigilante seconded. "It twernt exactly a hog-killin' time for me either, but it ain't right ta leave her in the calaboose for a wrong she ain't done."

"For goodness sake!" Courtney nearly screamed. "She almost killed Kara and Steel, and nearly blew up the Watchtower and the majority of the League! I mean, c'mon!"

"I think we're getting a little ahead of ourselves," Pat commented. Addressing his next statement to the two women, he added, "We'll pass your request on to the senior members; they have the final call on stuff like this."

"Oh, this is gonna end well," Oliver groaned as he keyed his communicator. "T, you better call in the brass. There's been a... complication."

"Why do all our meetings go off on tangents like this?" Clark silently demanded to whatever entity wished to listen. The six available senior League members had received an emergency summons from the Watchtower a mere few hours ago with instructions to return to base with all possible haste. The Kryptonian complied and, a record-

breaking intersystem trip later, found himself swept up in a whirlwind of activity.

On the surface, the issue seemed so simple. In fact, it closely mirrored his earlier interactions with Darkseid. Like himself, Gallatea's mind had been superseded and subsequently used to commit heinous acts. Once she had been properly deprogrammed, however, the cloned woman expressed an interest in assisting the organization that she had been forced to assault – just as he did.

Unfortunately, most of the inner council did not view the issue in those terms, which inexorably led to the current ruckus monopolizing the emergency meeting. Finally growing tired of the racket, the Man of Steel gave a shrill whistle to gain the others' attention.

"Listen, I know that several of you have valid reasons to be cautious – I'm not disagreeing with you," the last Son of Krypton announced into the newfound silence. "I'm just saying that I know where she is right now emotionally, and she deserves a chance to redeem herself – for her own sake, if nothing else."

"How do we know that she's completely re-conditioned?" John demanded. "The same techniques that Cadmus used on her were used with Doomsday, and I'm sure you remember how well that debacle turned out for us."

"Like I said, that's a good reason for showing caution," Clark admitted. "However, we should keep in mind that the fault for her actions does not lie with her. She was a victim in that situation even more than we were."

"I'm not sure that Kara and Steel would agree with you," Batman pointed out gruffly.

"You'd be surprised," Clark disagreed. "After everyone learned just what Cadmus had done to her, Kara felt terrible for hurting Gallatea as she did. I think she still has an occasional nightmare about the battle."

"Steel feels much the same way," Diana supplied. "His armor prevented him from taking too much damage, and he did not take the assault personally."

"Hey, not that I'm against us getting another super babe – sorry about that, Supes –,” Wally spoke up when he realized the relation between Metropolis' son and the potential new recruit, "but don't you think a lot of folks are gonna be a little upset about the whole 'blow up the Watchtower' bit?"

Shayera looked thoughtful for a moment before she added her opinion to the meeting. "We can tell those who are really worried about her being here that we just want to keep an eye on her. If she's on the level, then she'll prove herself trustworthy eventually. Remember, this is the voice of experience speaking, after all."

"We still need to have some sort of countermeasure in place in the event she goes rogue," Batman insisted, "and be prepared to use them if necessary."

"What more can we do?" Superman replied. "We've already installed automatically-triggered red sun lamps throughout the corridors, you still carry around that Kryptonite ring, and we have several A-level metahumans that can contain her if necessary. Even if I'm off-station, we still have Diana, Kara, or Mr. Black."

Taking Batman's continued silence to mean tacit agreement, Clark looked to the others and asked, "So, are we agreed to give Gallatea a chance to prove herself trustworthy, with the proviso that she will be under supervision until her trustworthiness can be verified?"

"I'm in favor," Diana seconded.

"Sure. I'm in," Shayera added.

"John?" Clark asked after a few seconds' worth of silence.

"Fine. I agree," the Green Lantern finally admitted.

"Bruce?" the Kryptonian prompted the only member present that hadn't yet voted.

"I'll allow that it will be easier to monitor her conduct if she is kept close at hand," Batman finally submitted. "Even if she doesn't present an immediate physical threat, she may still be intended as a security leak for Waller."

"Okay, the motion passes," Superman announced, "and we'll be sure to monitor her behavior. Now, the next item on the agenda is the confrontation with Eiling in downtown Metropolis. The late general seems to have stolen an experimental chemical cocktail from the old Cadmus headquarters. Apparently, this drug was created during World War II when the Nazis were attempting to create super soldiers. Eiling tore up a good section of town and endangered countless lives before he was finally stopped."

The others flipped through their copies of the summary as they scanned the highlights of the confrontation. Diana was the first to voice the question they all had on their minds.

"Why were only seven non-powered Leaguers dispatched to cover a threat of this magnitude?" the Amazon demanded.

"Mr. Terrific informs me that everyone was already in play elsewhere," Clark responded. "It is fortunate that Mr. Black happened upon them. The alternative could have been very messy."

"I somehow doubt that it was entirely chance," John announced. "I'd imagine that the potential carnage for such an altercation would be fairly noticeable to the Grim Reaper."

"If that's really who he is," Flash announced as he quickly read the rest of the report at an accelerated pace. "Pat's thinking that his neat glowing sword thing means that Mr. Black's really the guardian angel from the Garden of Eden. The guy's got a point; you gotta admit that B's a lot nicer than what you'd think Death would be like."

"Of course, this theory of Sir Justin's bears thought as well," Diana admitted. "Even my people heard murmurings of the supposedly invincible Black Knight. Perhaps there is more to the story than just idle gossip and good fortune..."

"Not to mention the possibility of a reincarnated King Arthur," Shayera piped. "Sir Justin still cannot ascertain if that's the case, but it would explain his frequent British references."

"I'll check on getting Jason Blood to discretely observe him," Batman announced. "He should be able to discern the truth, give his history and... unique abilities."

Clark brought the meeting back in line. "Aside from all of this, Bruce, Diana, and I received firsthand information that all-but-confirms that Mr. Black is really a Hindu god named Krishna," Superman added. "From what Bruce told me, he's been around since before the world was inhabited by humans. Apparently, he comes to Earth whenever demoniac activity increases to threatening levels."

"Whoa!" Flash shook his head. "How can one guy wear that many hats? I mean, he can't be all of this stuff... can he?"

"Well, he can travel through time at will," Shayera noted.

"Okay, I'll buy that," the Fastest Man Alive admitted, "but why would he want to do it, even if he could?"

Diana managed an elegant shrug. "He's a very old immortal with an overabundance of power," she pointed out the obvious. "Maybe he just went around putting out fires and different people caught him in the act and wrote about it. It's possible that the different legends started that way and just got blended together over the years. Or maybe," she added a moment later, "he was just bored and decided to play several different parts throughout history for the entertainment value."

Wally just began beating his head against the table while demanding, "Make it stop!"

A/N: Thus concludes Chapter Seven of Terminal Justice. The delay wasn't nearly as long as the wait for the previous chapter, so hopefully the volume of death threats from hanging readers will lessen. In any event, I do hope that you found this latest entry entertaining.

For those of you who were wondering: Yes, the end to the fight between Harry and Eiling was inspired by Underworld. What can I say? I'm a Kate Beckinsale fan.

I would also like to express my gratitude for Chris's continued amusing anecdotes for the TJ mini-verse, namely the Universal Remote drabble at the beginning of the chapter.

Additionally, I salute James for his assistance with proofreading this chapter.

Finally, thanks go out to all of you who contributed the inspiring suggestions that I incorporated into this chapter.

Next on the writing docket is the aftereffects of Gallatea's introduction, a voyage to the Isle of Avalon, and a mental swap a la "The Great Brain Robbery".

I hope you found this latest submission to be worth the wait, and I await your reviews/suggestions/etc. Bonus points if you spotted the historical reference at the beginning of the chapter.

Previous Chapter
Terminal Justice

Chapter 7: A Knight To Remember
by Overkill

Next Chapter

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Chapter 8: The Expedition by Overkill

Next Chapter

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The Expedition

"Man, I can't believe that I missed that!" Kara exclaimed to a patiently listening Harry. "And in Metropolis of all places!"

Once Kara and Flash returned from settling an escalated riot in Madagascar, Courtney lost no time in informing the other blonde teenager about her team's most recent mission. As Stargirl continued to regale the Argosian with the mysterious Mr. Black's exploits, the blonde powerhouse silently vowed to seek out the man of the hour at her first opportunity. Fortune smiled on Kara a few minutes later when Courtney paused for breath; the nearly invulnerable superheroine quickly made her excuses to the staff-wielding girl and set out on her quest. Fortunately, her journey was short and Kara found the wizard in question in a matter of minutes. Wasting no time, the girl quickly recapped what she had recently learned, ending in her exclamatory remark.

"Perhaps it was for the best," Harry offered mildly. "After all, the clod was planning to murder your cousin."

As luck would have it, the Kryptonian cousin in question was traversing an intersecting corridor and overheard their exchange. Having finally settled the matter of Gallatea's provisional induction to the League, the council decided that Clark would be the best choice to break the news to the cloned girl. However, given the nature of the conversation he had just gleaned... perhaps it would behoove him to delay his retrieval of his other cousin for a few moments longer.

Ignoring the short blonde-haired woman's increasingly crimson skin tone, Harry continued, "There's no telling what a brute such as he would do to you if he had his way."

"I can fend for myself, thank you very much!" the blonde spitfire stated heatedly. "That little fluke in Shambala was a one-time deal."

"Your prowess in battle was never in question, Kara," Harry replied with poorly concealed amusement. "I merely point out that I know his type. Trust me when I say that you do not want to be near him more than you must. I've encountered such hypocritical morons in the past and will no doubt continue to do so until the end of days."

Harry sighed audibly. "The act never changes, really. I first heard the story straight from the chief snake-faced bugger himself; he never shut up about it. Every time I turned around, it was 'there is no good and evil, just power and those not afraid to use it' blah blah blah. 'Join me and we can rule this world for eternity' blah blah blah. Of course, all of that was interspersed with bouts evil laughter."

The wizard shook his head irritably. "It's really bloody annoying! On the bright side, I've learned that anybody else talking that way can be immediately put on my 'to flatten' list."

"Snake-faced bugger'?" Kara questioned amusedly.

Harry shrugged. "Well, he technically wasn't a snake," he admitted, "but the idiot certainly acted like one. The pest was rather partial to the serpent form as well, as I recall. Bane of my existence practically as long as I can remember, but I guess it doesn't matter now. It took some doing, but he was defeated. Granted, not without a great sacrifice..."

The reminiscing mage cut off his recollection. "I'm boring you, aren't I?" he suddenly asked. "Say, how about we go sailing again? I just so happened to stumble across the location to the Isle of Avalon earlier and it's only accessible by sea. You wouldn't happen to know of any budding archaeologists that might be interested in accompanying me, would you?"

"Are you serious?" the blonde girl squeaked. "I'd love to go! Are we taking anybody else?" She seemed to think for a moment before

adding, "And if you don't mind, could we stick to the surface? I think I'd prefer to smell the ocean breeze this time."

Harry put aside his private ruminations on exactly how the short feminine form facing him was able to emit such a high-pitched squeal and smiled slightly. "Well, it just so happens that a friend of mine loaned me a more... traditional ship. It's a wooden Concord-class Dutch flute with sails and cannons and everything. My associate assures me that it practically flies across the waves, and it can carry a good-sized crew. And yes, I was considering inviting some others to join us, but I'm open to suggestions."

"Really? I'd love to try an old ship like that!" the girl exclaimed. "Let me change into something more appropriate and we can go recruiting. Meet me at my room in fifteen?" she asked hopefully.

"With bells on, as they say," Harry confirmed. "Never did really get that reference, now that I think about it," he mused.

"Great! See you then!" she called out as she hurried in the direction of the living quarters.

Harry just chuckled as the energetic young woman literally flew down the halls. Donning his black leather tricorne from their last adventure, the dimension-hopping mage sedately began walking in the same direction as his companion while humming a jaunty tune.

Superman leaned on the wall for support as he absorbed this latest information; the Flying Dutchman was real! Granted, his previous conversations with the pivotal immortal figure had marginally prepared him for such sensational tales but still... the Dutchman was real. Once that particular piece of information finally percolated through his thought processes, another off-hand tidbit became obvious.

"Snake-faced'?" the Man of Steel whispered to himself. "As long as he can remember'?" The other man's casual remark brought to mind the Council's most recent conversation regarding Eden and the Fall of Man. Even with his prior experiences with the... man, Clark could scarcely comprehend that the League was playing host to an eyewitness for one of the most pivotal points in human history.

Thinking of his adopted father's interest in matters of the Old Testament, a half-formed thought of introducing the ancient being to his folks scurried through his mind before he squashed the notion. He was hardly in any position to make demands of Death's time and doubted the wisdom of introducing the Grim Reaper to his aging parents in any event.

Putting the issue from his mind, Superman slipped through one of the external hatches and flew nonchalantly in direction of Metropolis. Galatea would just have to wait - what he needed now more than anything was some normalcy.

If such an alien concept still existed.

"Brainiac, I know you're in there. I can almost feel you!" Lex Luthor growled as yet another experiment ended in failure. "Abasing myself before Grodd, then running this unwieldy super gang! It will all be worth it if I can just free the only piece of you that remains."

Tala rolled her eyes and stepped between the bald criminal genius and the sedimentary object of his frustrations. "Lex... don't talk to the rock," she ordered breathily as she leaned against his shoulders in a bid to focus his attention elsewhere.

"Stay out of this, witch!" Luthor barked before brushing her aside without concern. Irritated, he ran the next experiment in his battery of tests, only to meet with failure once more. "It doesn't make sense!" he complained as he stalked away from the machinery. "The smallest scrap of Brainiac should be enough to reconstitute him!" Luthor sank into his control chair in thought.

"Don't worry about it, Darling," Tala cooed as she began massaging the master criminal's scalp. "I'm sure that it will be-"

"Unless Grodd is somehow preventing it," he interrupted, lost in his ponderings. Seeming to give the idea more credence, Luthor sprang out of his chair and began striding purposefully towards the Legion's prison cells. Rolling her eyes yet again, Tala followed the taller figure as he deactivated the maximum-security cell's automated systems and entered.

"What do you want, Luthor?" Grodd demanded dully from his bound position against an upright steel slab.

"How do I unlock the Brainiac code?" the other criminal demanded immediately.

"You're a genius," the intelligent ape replied sarcastically, "figure it out!"

Luthor sneered at the restrained primate. "Tell me, you leering manipulative knuckle-dragger, or I'll-"

"Lex, Lex," the talking simian interrupted in a smug tone, "you can't expect me to give up my only bargaining chip! What's in it for me?"

"When this is over," Luthor growled as he began to leave the cell, "I'm going to sell your body for dog meat!"

As Luthor stalked away, Grodd raised his voice to the patiently waiting Tala. "It must pain you to see me like this after what we've been to one another," he entreated.

"My taste in boyfriends has evolved," she said shortly before exiting the cell and closing the door behind her.

Out in the hallway, Luthor was pacing in barely suppressed anger. "Lex, you're the leader now," Tala said in an attempt to calm the man down. Laying what was intending to be a comforting hand on his shoulder, she added, "You don't need to lock horns with him."

Brushing the woman's contact away, Luthor protested, "The only thing that matters now is a speck of information locked somewhere deep inside Grodd's thick skull!"

"Yes, okay. So... we break his head open and take it," she answered simply.

Lex turned around and graced her with a truly terrible smile.

The sound of a motorized door interrupted Harry's continued perusal of Henchgirl's Animagus text. The author was very thorough in his research and provided simple step-by-step instructions to determine one's form – or forms, as the case may be. Deciding to try the technique when he returned that evening, the wizard looked up at Kara's expected hailing – and blinked.

The girl had changed into a tight-fitting light blue t-shirt, a pair of khaki-colored shorts, and sturdy hiking boots. Additionally, she braided her long blonde hair so that it fell down her back and not in her face. To round off the ensemble, the Argosian had a pair of dark sunglasses perched atop her head.

"Ready to go tomb raiding?" Kara asked amusedly.

Harry felt one eyebrow rise at the girl's enthusiastic actions. "Pardon?"

"You know... the Tomb Raider?" she said while smiling indulgently.

The wizard nodded. "I know a few tomb raiders, yes. What's your point?"

The blonde Argosian looked at her taller companion disbelievingly. "You've never heard of Lara Croft, Tomb Raider? Female archaeologist that always goes on the most unbelievable adventures?"

Harry just shook his head while trying to stifle a grin.

"Playstation?" she demanded desperately.

Harry frowned in thought for a moment. "That's some sort of video gaming system, isn't it?" the mage inquired tentatively.

The girl shook her head resignedly. "You are so deprived!" Kara finally announced. "That settles it! When we get back from this trip, I'm gonna set you down and explain the unbridled joy that is the home entertainment game console."

"I'm looking forward to it," Harry dutifully replied a few moments later. "I take it that this... Lara Croft wears an outfit similar to this?"

"Yep," the blonde girl answered as she gave her ensemble another survey, "though she's got this cool bottomless backpack that can hold practically anything, whereas I don't even own a satchel."

Harry looked contemplative for a moment before replying, "I think that I just might be able to help you with that." Retrieving his school

trunk from his coat, the wizard rifled through its unorganized contents until he came upon the travel pack from his last major expedition. "Ah ha! Here it is! It even matches those boots of yours."

"Cool!" Kara exclaimed as she looked over the accessory. "Too bad that you can't make it bottomless as well," she commented.

The mage snorted and her eyes widened in anticipation. "You mean it?" Before he could reply, the girl had already opened the flap and shoved her entire arm into the bag – which would have been impossible for an ordinary pack of that size.

"Awesome!" the Argosian praised as she tossed the carrier on her back and settled the straps.

Harry smiled at the girl's enthusiasm and repacked his trunk while she craned her neck to take in her new accessory. The wizard had no sooner returned the box to his coat, however, before a pair of slight arms enveloped him with no more warning than a soft-spoken "Thanks".

Blinking repeatedly at the unexpected reaction, Harry finally replied with a highly original, "Uhm... you're welcome." Vowing to someday reach the point where such displays of affection no longer discomforted him, the wizard hesitantly patted the shorter figure on the back before asking, "Shall we get started then?"

Kara gave the spell caster a close eye. "Wait a second. You aren't planning on wearing that on this little expedition, are you?" she demanded while taking in his casual black shirt/pant/coat combination with complementary pirate's hat.

Harry looked briefly at his own attire before meeting the girl's pointed stare. "Err... no?" he offered tentatively.

"No," Kara stated decisively. "You can make your clothes look like anything, right?"

"Yes..." the wizard answered uneasily. "Why?"

"We can do much better than that," she offered while ignoring his voiced question. Grabbing a hold of his black t-shirt, Kara ordered, "First, this should be white with a collar and buttons."

Rolling his eyes at his fussy companion but playing along, Harry complied. "There. Happy?"

Waving off his slight sarcasm, Supergirl unbuttoned the first couple of fasteners on the shirt's front and announced. "Good. Now, those pants should be olive green and cotton, not denim."

Harry made a visible effort to restrain a retort and did as she bid.

"Okay, the leather coat is alright... except it should only be waist length and brown leather, not black," the blonde girl offered after a moment's thought. "Can you make a brown felt hat with a leather band? You know, sort of Fedora meets Western?"

"I suppose so," Harry finally admitted. "Why are-"

"In a minute," she interrupted. "Just do it."

He 'did it' and the Argosian took in her handiwork. "All it needs now is a bullwhip and leather shoulder bag and you're done."

Shooting the girl a mild glare, Harry retrieved his whip from its new home in his gauntlet and conjured the other accessory. "Can we leave now?" he begged.

"In a minute, Indiana Joe," Kara chirped before latching onto the wizard's arm and pulling him back into her room. "Just let me get a few more things for the trip and we can go rifle through the League for the rest of our party."

"Erm... okay," Harry agreed after finding himself in the girl's quarters, "but you do know that I'm not from Indiana, don't you?"

"You mean you've never heard of 'Indiana Jones' either?" she demanded as she opened her closet door, only to be met with a flurry of junk. The blonde-haired woman shrugged in a 'what can you do?' gesture before she began routing through the mess in search of some hitherto unidentified possession. "It's like one of the best movies ever!"

"Uhm... no. Sorry," he admitted as he took in the rest of the room. Parts of the domicile were exactly like what one would imagine a

teenaged superheroine's bedroom to look like, what with the scattered clothes, trophies, and newspaper clippings all over the place. The rest of the space, however, was a completely different story. In fact, some of the dissected machinery and technical manuals would have been right at home in HENCHGIRL's laboratory back on Black Island.

Looking over some sketches for some sort of crystal and laser array, Harry noted, "You know, I think that you'd get along smashingly with a good friend of mine. She's a magical engineer and a pretty good one, too, if I do say so myself."

"Really?" the girl asked as she looked up from her search. "Oh, those..." Kara said quietly as her eyes fell on the source of his comment. Harry noticed her suddenly tense. Forcing a bright smile, the girl offered, "Would you believe that I keep them for the pictures?"

Harry cocked his head to one side in confusion. "Uhm... no," he negated, "but nice try. Why are you so uneasy? Are these a part of some secret project you are working on or something?"

"Well, no..." Kara hedged, "it's just that most people find my being from a technologically superior planet to Earth intimidating. I'm sort of trying to keep from 'rubbing it in', so to speak." She shrugged slightly before adding, "And most guys seem to think intelligence is a turn-off in a girl."

"So you hide part of who you are?" Harry asked disbelievingly. At the girl's hesitant nod, he exclaimed, "Sod that! You are who you are, and that's all there is to it. If somebody else has a problem with that - tough! Now, as for your other point... I'm a bloke, I'm single, and I realized that there are people out there who are a lot smarter than me a long time ago. Oddly enough, most of them seem to be female, as strange as it sounds."

The wizard made a gesture to encompass the mass of technology. "Personally, I'd love to understand this sort of thing more, but I can barely operate a computer system. Just because I grew up living without all of this doesn't mean that you have to wallow in the Stone Age."

Kara looked at him askance for a few moments before she huffed in suppressed laughter. "You have a very unique way of looking at the world, you know that?"

Harry chuckled ruefully. "That's a more polite way of phrasing it than I normally receive," the mage admitted, "but that's just who I am. I can't change it. Anyway," he continued in an obvious effort to change the topic, "is there something that I can help you find?"

"Nope," she replied as she dropped a few more garments and some books into her new backpack. "That's got it. Thanks anyway, though. So... you've got everything but the crew squared away then?"

"Well, I haven't picked the best spot to start sailing from yet, but everything else is a 'go'," the wizard admitted.

The Argosian nodded. "Alright, how about I sound out a few people to tag along while you pick the departure point?"

"Sounds fair," Harry agreed. "See you in a bit." Parting comments made, Harry Apparated off the space station to begin his geographic assignment.

Suddenly alone in her apartment, Kara just shook her head even as a slight smile began to appear. "One of these days," the Girl of Steel vowed to no one in particular, "he's going to slip up and leave a room just like everybody else."

The blonde powerhouse nodded decisively to herself before musing aloud, "Now, who can I get on such short notice...?"

"Hmm..." Harry mused as he surveyed the area from atop a stone tower, "this isn't good." The wizard had Apparated to the coordinates that the map indicated as being Glastonbury. According to the old parchment, this tiny settlement was adjacent to an extremely large lake surrounding the mist-shrouded Isle of Avalon.

This specification was most unfortunate for the magically inclined archaeologist, however, since someone had apparently moved the lake without telling him.

He quickly disproved his first explanation of Apparating to the wrong village when he readily located the famed Glastonbury Abbey.

Likewise, the wizard could easily spot the mystical Chalice Well, which his guidebook indicated as being a sacred garden for Muggles, as well as his current impromptu footing – the Glastonbury Tor. Much like the other two famous landmarks, the stone tower was shrouded in myth to the point that no one truly knew of its purpose.

While his traveler's guide was singularly uninformative on the topic, the wizard found that the freestanding edifice gave an excellent view of the surrounding area. From its lofty heights, Harry could see endless fields of fertile farmland, which led to his previous summary of the situation pertaining to the missing body of water. Looking closely at the area surrounding the tower, the wizard could just make out a worn line about ten feet above the base of the Tor where the water must have washed against its sides. Harry expanded his scrutiny to the grassy fields again and could see a definite rationale behind its terraced appearance. Combined with the land's obviously fertile nature, it became obvious that the area was once completely submerged in water.

'Of course, this doesn't answer where the lake went,' Harry mused sourly, 'or what became of the island once the water was removed.'

A sudden buzzing in his pocket cut off his private ruminations. After ensuring that there were no Muggles nearby, Harry withdrew his Zippo from its place within his coat and thumbed the lever. "Black here," he answered.

"Mr. Black, it's Henchgirl," a familiar female voice responded from the one-time cigarette lighter, "did I call at a bad time?"

While the blonde potions' mistress sounded perfectly normal on the surface, Harry thought he detected a slight undercurrent of nervousness. "Of course not, Henchgirl," the wizard responded. "What's up?"

"Oh, a little of this, a little of that," the witch hedged. "You know how it is."

This response definitely raised some mental alarms. Demonstrating his tact and subtlety once again, Harry carefully approached the issue with a compassionate, "All right, what's gone wrong now?"

The woman uttered an obviously false chuckle before she finally replied. "Wrong? Nothing's wrong," she denied. "Everything's perfectly fine here. Yep, definitely nothing wrong."

"Henchgirl...?" Harry growled. "Spill. It. Now!"

He heard the woman take a deep breath before rapidly responding, "I-found-the-details-on-Caledfwlch-and-you're-not-going-to-like-it!" Gasping for air, she added, "There, I said it!"

Harry blinked as he sorted through the witch's last comment. With a sense of dark foreboding, he calmly ordered, "Explanation – now."

Hesitantly, his all-but-sister relayed numerous myths and pieces of folklore surrounding the legendary blade. Some originated in the time of King Arthur fifteen centuries previously, while yet others dated back even further. When the magical engineer had at last fallen silent, Harry heaved a great sigh before tiredly massaging his temples with one hand.

"So... this woman I bumped into is some sort of immortal faerie creature who was charged with protecting some fancy magic sword," Harry stated flatly. "Countless centuries later, I come strolling along and accept the sword, thereby freeing her to flee into Faerie heaven while simultaneously obligating myself to fulfill some vague role as a champion of the Light? Is that more or less the size of it?"

"Well, the sword should help a bit," Henchgirl muttered tentatively while ignoring his inquiry. "After all, supposedly even Muggles were able to wield fire and lightning when using it. In the hands of a wizard, its power would be... immeasurable."

"Henchgirl!" Harry barked warningly.

"Err... sorry about that," she added sheepishly. "It's just that I've been re-reading several interesting books on the subject and I got excited. I mean, this is one of the biggest magical finds in history! It could prove beyond the shadow of a doubt that King Arthur truly existed."

"Henchgirl," Harry whined pleadingly.

"Just wait until we tell the others!" the infuriating woman exclaimed giddily. "Our own Mr. Black, wielding the High King of England's sword! Do you know what this means?"

"Stop right there!" Harry ordered sternly. "Tell no one! I'm still living down the other rumors – I am not about to spark off some half-baked idea that I'm the reincarnation of some medieval warlord, and I am most certainly not interested in being the King of England – or anywhere else, for that matter."

The witch huffed irritably. "Fine! Take all the fun out of it! See if I care!" she protested childishly.

Harry felt his headache worsen yet again. Stifling a groan, he replied, "Thank you for the information, Henghirl. Is that everything?"

"Yes!" the inventor replied disappointedly.

Releasing a sigh of relief, Harry smiled as he responded, "Great. Thanks again, Henghirl."

"You're welcome, Your Majesty!" the blonde woman chirped before disconnecting.

Growling at the now-deactivated device, Harry tossed it back in his coat pocket. Pausing for a few moments in thought, the wizard muttered darkly before summoning the object of his frustration from his gauntlet. As with the last two times he held it, the weapon began to glow.

Unlike the previous times, however, the silver map attached to the tower's roof also began to shine. No longer blindly believing in coincidence, Harry engaged his Mage Sight and examined the blade in his hand. As he expected, the magical weapon seemed to have some sort of connection to the map – more specifically, a small illuminated slot in the center of the Tor's icon on the map.

"How curious," Harry murmured while studying the bond between the two objects. Bolstering his inner Gryffindor, Harry held the blade over the indentation with one hand, and - before common sense could regain a stranglehold – he plunged the mystical weapon into the floor. His action created a tremendous flash of light, forcing him to

instinctively close his eyes. After the unexpected illumination faded, Harry cracked open one eye to survey the damage.

"Hmm," Harry deliberated as he scanned his surroundings, "that's odd."

The wizard's 'oddity' was the complete and unexplained transformation of the entire tower. Unlike its former weathered appearance, the structure now possessed a reinforced top, which bore what he thought might be a Greek temple. This monument was circular in design and boasted a beautiful mosaic as a floor instead of the former metallic map. To finish off the temple motif, twelve white equidistant columns supported the domed ceiling.

Wanting a closer look, Harry rose to his feet, dragging the sword out of the tiled floor in the process. The fragrant scent drew him to the edge of the temple, where the wizard received yet another shock. Instead of the modern village and abundant arable land, naught but trees, rushes, and water met his eye.

And off into the distance, his Mage Sight could just make out the form of an island – exactly where the map said it was.

"Well, Toto," the wizard muttered to himself, "we're certainly not in Kansas anymore. At least there isn't an old hag with an aquatic allergy or a mob of hyperactive garden gnomes lurking nearby – I hope."

Wondering how much time he could spend exploring before he had to return to the Watchtower, Harry glanced at his watch. Repeated looks separated by furious blinking did little but confirm that the timekeeper had indeed halted – just as it did whenever he 'paused' the universe with his remote.

The wizard nodded as he felt the metaphysical penny drop. "Okay... somehow, this pig sticker opened a gateway to some sort of sub dimension," Harry commented aloud. "Time seems to be stopped in here, so... someone must have created this time bubble and stuck Avalon in it." He frowned in confusion. "Why the bloody hell would someone do a thing like that?" he demanded. "Was it for defense? Hmm... maybe the case of the disappearing lake had something to do with it."

Harry shrugged. "Ah, well," he exclaimed lackadaisically. "Since time's not exactly a wasting, let's go exploring."

Some indeterminate time later, Harry felt that he had a good grasp of the pocket dimension's general layout. He quickly discovered that this Glastonbury was completely deserted, unlike the one he had inadvertently left. Taking to the skies, the wizard got the lay of the land and compared the sight to his map. Thankfully, the fog-shrouded shadow out in the bog appeared to be the exact size and shape as his island objective.

Feeling a great deal of relief at succeeding in his scouting mission, Harry returned to the Tor. To bolster his confidence even further, he had found a large skiff moored at the tower's base. A closer inspection revealed that the wooden craft was enchanted to sail between the Tor and the island, much like the sleds available back in the Canadian wilderness. Nodding happily to himself, the wizard sauntered back up the hill and entered the tower's base.

Considering the mission a success, the immortal mage began ascending the winding staircase to depart when an odd niggling sensation at the back of his neck caused him to halt. Harry could not quite put his finger on it, but he sensed a certain 'wrongness' about the room, as if it were being disguised somehow. His Gryffindor side rallied to the unspoken challenge and Harry began methodically casting revealing spells around the granite room. He finally hit pay dirt when one of his spells caused a patch of wall to ripple and dissolve, revealing an archway and a set of descending stairs.

"Oh, why not?" he asked himself quietly as his feet began their downward journey. Conjuring a Blue Bell flame to light his way, Harry continued until the stairway yielded to a small cavern. A few quick charms sufficiently illuminated the space, leaving the wizard more than slightly shocked. The cavern was not much larger than a normal-sized room and could probably have been mistaken for the tower's cellar – if it were not for its rather morbid contents.

Two funeral biers of uneven dimensions sat in the center of the subterranean space. Moving closer despite himself, Harry gazed at the two crystal encasements. Upon the larger bier, the wizard found two occupants – one male and one female. The male figure appearing to be in his early thirties, wore medieval armor, and had a battered shield replete with dragon coat of arms draped over him

like a blanket. One gauntleted arm held the dainty appendage of the second body, which was that of an attractive blonde-haired woman. The female corpse wore a formal gown and a simple golden circlet upon her brow.

Blinking at the perfectly preserved pair, Harry caught sight of a strange script that was repeatedly carved around the platform – 'Hic jacet Arthurus, Rex quondam, rexque futurus'. His disbelief rose tenfold when the translation filtered into his consciousness.

Here lies Arthur, Former king, and future king.

"King Arthur?" Harry demanded dumbly of the armored corpse. Getting no answer there, his attention turned to his bedmate and announced, "Then that would make you Guinevere."

His eyes widened in sudden anticipation. "But if you two are Arthur and Guinevere, then who is...?" He slowly turned around and looked at the other, smaller bier. It also supported a crystal casing but bore only a single occupant. He looked to be very old, what with his gray beard extending nearly as far as Professor Dumbledore's, and yet still seemed to be well preserved. He was clothed in a simple robe and held a gnarled staff in his crossed hands.

Even without his Mage Sight, Harry knew a powerful wizard when he saw one. "No... it cannot be! Merlin?" he whispered disbelievingly. The young wizard immediately spotted a simple inscription in the slab's side. The topmost line stated plainly Myrddin Emrys, and Harry began to feel inexplicable disappointment. Such emotions quickly gave way to amazement as his eyes fell upon the second line of text.

Merlin Ambrosius.

A thousand different thoughts flew through his mind and headed in as many directions. For a moment, Harry pondered a range of issues from who built this well-hidden mausoleum to disbelief that he was standing at the feet of the supposedly greatest wizard of all time. With such conflicting thoughts overflowing his consciousness, it is perhaps understandable then that he chose to summarize this latest experience in his usual brief style.

"Myrddin and Merlin are the same wizard?" he demanded awkwardly. "Blood-y hell!"

After Harry regained the use of most of his faculties, he raised himself off the floor. 'Odd,' he mused, 'I don't remember sitting down.' Shaking off the disorientation, he moved to leave the grotto when his gaze fell on a simple leather bound book lying at the foot of Merlin's bier. Seeing it outside of the crystal barrier and wondering how he overlooked it before, the mage gave in to his curiosity and carefully picked up the volume.

Squinting at the unfamiliar script of the text, Harry retrieved his glasses and attempted to read the book again. He succeeded on his second attempt and quickly scanned the first few pages. The book had a simple format; each sheet of parchment bore a date at the top, and the entire collection was ordered chronologically. It was not until he had skimmed several paragraphs that he realized the true nature of the ancient volume in his hands.

'It's a journal!' Harry realized suddenly. 'Merlin's journal!'

He quickly flipped through the rest of the tome, catching glimpses of spell forms and ritual diagrams in addition to commentary on topics ranging from Dark Creatures to theoretical conjectures on the nature of the universe. He was only barely aware of his jaw falling open as he returned to the first page and began to read.

Some relative time later, Harry finally finished perusing Merlin's journal. His head spinning from concepts he had never even heard mention of from contemporary wizards, the dimension-hopping wizard decided to bid the three famous individuals farewell. As his booted feet trod the stone access up to the roof of the tower and his ultimate egress, Harry contemplated what he had learned about the famous sorcerer lying in state.

It was, quite simply, eye opening. He quickly learned that the famous magician was deeply cynical, for one thing. His private memoirs contained several biting references that would quickly dispel any illusions of his sainthood. Quite the contrary, Harry pieced together that Merlin's father actually was a demon, although the eventual Royal wizard worked tirelessly to make amends for his less than desirable birth.

In fact, Harry found himself identifying with the long-dead wizard a great deal. Like Harry himself, Merlin was as widely feared as revered in his day. Additionally, while he did not have a famous scar, his very name was quite effective in ostracizing him from his own people.

And yet, the man still kept on fighting against the evils of his age despite all the discouragements life threw at him. Thanks to his longevity, Merlin had lost nearly everything he held dear. His adopted family, his friends, even his dream of utopia that was Camelot. Even after all of the death and destruction, however, the man still defended the realms – both magical and not – until his own eventual end.

Harry reached the climax of his climb and stood once more upon the mosaic floor. He had discovered that this little pocket of space was of Merlin's design as well. His journal documented how the monks of the nearby Glastonbury Abbey were draining the lake to allow for farming. Fearful for Avalon's survival, Lady Viviane of the Lake entreated Merlin to move the Isle beyond their reach. The mage did as she requested, tying the sub dimensional space into the intersecting Ley lines at the Tor.

Harry smiled slightly at the many lurid passages about the water-dependent creature's... capabilities. A slight chuckle escaped him at the thought. A half-demon wizard and an aquatic faerie - who would have guessed?

Finished with his scouting mission, Harry summoned Caledfwlch to his hand and just stared at it for a moment. After his impressive shifting of the island, Merlin documented that he laid a series of protections over the magical nexus. These safeguards would shield the entrance through the Tor from those individuals he considered undeserving of Avalon – which seemed to mostly encompass the entire Wizarding World at that point.

Harry laughed again - though more ruefully this time - at how well he had been manipulated into this role. Merlin's plan was actually quite simple. Only a wizard or witch would be able to trigger the transportation magic. To do that, they would require the use of Caledfwlch, which refused to serve wicked ends. Additionally, even if that individual could force the sword to do their will, they would first

have to wrest it from his lover's possession – who could be quite formidable when vexed.

Merlin was quite vivid when he documented one occasion on how well she responded to his forgetting their anniversary. Needless to say, he was very cautious to remember the holiday for the remainder of his days.

Shaking off his reminiscing, Harry inverted the sword and plunged it back into its tiled receptacle. A blinding flash and a vow to purchase some sunglasses later, Harry found himself once more standing on the unadorned tower. A glance at his watch revealed that time was once again moving normally, although it seemed that no more than a second had passed during his long absence.

Having formulated his plan earlier of sailing from Boston to the English seashore then taking a portable black hole to Glastonbury's Tor, the mage Apparated back to the Watchtower to rejoin Kara and the others. Reappearing behind the party waiting in the cafeteria, he revised his evaluation to the many others.

"Kara?" Harry asked levelly, hiding his amusement at the girl's slight jump at his unnoticed arrival. "What's going on?" he asked as he exchanged greetings with Galatea, Zatanna, a distinguished man that he believed to be Jason Blood, and all of the League members he had fought alongside earlier in Metropolis save Vigilante and Crimson Avenger.

The blonde powerhouse just looked at him innocently. "What? You said to invite a few others along."

"True enough," Harry allowed, "but I was expecting another person or two – not a dozen."

"Then you should have been more specific," the Argosian immediately countered in a teasing manner.

Harry blinked repeatedly before looking aside at the uniformed Green Arrow and robed Zatanna. "I'm not going to win this, am I?" he asked resignedly.

"Not a chance," Oliver replied while Zatanna shook her head with poorly concealed amusement.

Harry just closed his eyes and took a deep breath. "I could really use some coffee right about now," he grumbled before redirecting his gaze to the impishly smiling Supergirl. "Fine," he muttered, "but exactly why are they dressed like that? For that matter, why am I dressed like this?"

The blonde metahuman looked over the gathered people and made a show of inspecting their strange dress. While Zatanna wore some sort of mystical traveling cloak, both Sir Justin and Sir Jason had opted to garb themselves in armor. However, while the Shining Knight's ensemble was more suited to ancient times, the human host of the demon Etrigan sported a more modern weave of Kevlar. Both Pat Dugan and his stepdaughter were dressed in casual wear, but Courtney retained her staff and the wizard hazarded a guess that Pat's suit of armor was likely residing in his old satchel strung across Kara's back. As for the Green Arrow and Speedy, they both opted to remain in costume.

"Well..." she hedged, "'Tea sorta likes Archaeology, too, and since I'm already the Tomb Raider, she chose the pith hat and safari gear."

"So I see," Harry replied levelly. "And the rest...?"

Kara smiled brightly at Harry before replying, "Well, seeing as how this is like one of those medieval quests, you can't very well go without a couple of archers, some knights, and a sorceress, now can you?"

Harry just shook his head resignedly - he would never understand women. "And people say that I'm crazy," he muttered.

"You are crazy," Kara agreed readily. "Now, how are we getting to wherever this ship is?"

Harry just crossed his arms and glared half-heartedly at the shorter female. "You know," he announced casually, "it wasn't all that long ago that entire nations trembled at the mere mention of my name. I could defeat whole armies without so much as raising a finger – I know, I tried it once just for the heck of it – and none of them would have ever dared say that to me."

Kara smiled before patting his cheek mockingly. "And we're all very terrified of you as well," the girl announced while sounding anything but. "Now, let's make with the magic already – time's a'wastin!"

Harry just chuckled at the spirited girl as he withdrew one of the Professor's reusable Black Holes. The wizard cast the inky black shadow at the nearest wall while silently directing it to open on a secluded stretch of beach on the States' Eastern seaboard. "Your portal, oh impudent one," Harry declared.

"See how painless that was? Things would have gone a whole lot quicker if you just did what I told you the first time," the girl replied through a grin before she confidently strode through the portal.

Harry just stared at the retreating back of the sassy girl before his Marauder heritage once more made itself known. At least, that was rationalization he adopted to explain the sudden appearance of the water balloon flying on an intercept course with the back of Kara's head. Smiling smugly, Harry started whistling a cheerful tune as he traversed the magical doorway – to the accompaniment of a certain Argosian's heated protests.

The remaining eight people just looked at each other before their attention riveted to the sounds of an impromptu wrestling match on the other side of the gateway.

Oliver Queen ultimately put the group's collective thoughts into words with one brief statement.

"Well, at least we know that this trip won't be boring!"

"Look," Green Lantern forcefully stated after a tiresome bickering session between Dr. Fate, Mr. Terrific, Flash, and Red Tornado, "we know Grodd's running some kind of organized group. I'm tired of just putting out fires!"

"We need to find his new secret society and take the fight to them," Mr. Terrific seconded from his desk at the monitor womb.

"Guys, I'm not arguing that!" Flash protested. "There's just got to be another way."

"This is it," Mr. Terrific disagreed. "When Grodd took control of your mind a couple of years ago... even though that connection was broken, he left a psychic resonance."

"I can mystically access that resonance and trace it to Grodd, wherever he hides," Dr. Fate continued.

"And when we do find Grodd, we'll likely find Luthor, Bizarro, and any number of wanted criminals," Red Tornado pointed out in his mechanical voice.

"No doubt," Flash agreed, "but I don't like strangers nosing around in my brain!" He paused for a second before adding, "No offense, Doc."

Ignoring the slight, Fate replied, "I assure you that I won't be reading your thoughts. Your mind is simply a portal."

Flash began backing up uneasily. "This really seems like its more up J'onn's alley," he responded nervously.

"J'onn's not here," John Stewart replied forcefully as Mr. Terrific pushed the Scarlet Speedster into a chair. "Neither is Zatanna, Jason Blood, or Mr. Black."

"What do you say we go check with Batman?" Flash demanded as he grasped at straws. "He's got clues."

"You saw Batman's report," Mr. Terrific answered the unspoken question. "Grodd covered all of his tracks."

"We need to find him before he hurts anyone else, Flash," John pleaded. "This may be our only shot."

"Man!" Flash whined as he gave in to their combined arguments. "Just be careful with my head," he ordered as Dr. Fate approached him. "It's where I keep all my one-liners."

Ignoring the quip, the sorcerer went to work. He quickly established contact with Flash's mind before mentally traveling along a wispy path towards Grodd's own consciousness.

"You see how much I've learned from your mind control technology," Luthor boasted as a few minions finished connecting his headset to that of the restrained Gorilla Grodd. "Of course, I don't have your natural talent for the work, so my process is relatively crude." The bald criminal picked up the helmet and paused before placing it upon his head. "Last chance," he warned the talking ape. "Tell me what I want to know or I'll tear the information from your bleeding frontal lobe."

"You're a technological cretin," Grodd insulted the man, "a sadistic child playing with power tools."

Luthor looked at the primate blankly for a second before activating the machine.

"My spell has already found a trace of Grodd's mental signature," Dr. Fate reported to his companions. "It should be a simple matter of following it back to the source."

As he said this, his mind reached a strange feedback. Though wispy and indistinct, Fate observed some sort of mind linkage between his intended target and Lex Luthor before the powerful interference assaulted him moments later, forcing him to lose the contact. As he found himself once more aboard the Justice League's watchtower, he saw Flash's body struggling to rise as Green Lantern went to the downed speedster's aid.

"No, something's wrong!" Dr. Fate cried out as he suddenly realized what caused the broken connection. "That's not Flash's mind, it's Lex Luthor's!"

"What have you done to me?" Flash-Luthor demanded before running away in a blink. Dr. Fate's comment settled in a second later and the present Leaguers began attempting to catch the now super fast criminal running amok aboard their orbital headquarters.

After several narrow escapes, Flash's body ran out of the control room. As the team prepared to follow their target, Green Lantern voiced a newly risen concern.

"If Luthor's mind is in Flash's body, then where's Flash?"

Jason Blood grinned as he stepped through the Black Hole and found himself near a harbor in Boston. Aside from being slightly overcast and foggy, it was a great day for sailing, and it had been a long time since he had done so. His jubilant demeanor lasted until the group made its way to their ship's berth and his jaw fell open.

In front of him was a ship whose design had been obsolete for well over a century. Worse, he recognized this particular vessel. There were not all that many Dutch flutes built like the *Concorde* after all, especially with its forty guns. This particular ship had been the bane of many during the eighteenth century after its capture by pirates. Renamed the *Queen Anne's Revenge*, it had been Blackbeard's floating headquarters and the prize of his pirate fleet.

Ignoring Etrigan's inappropriate glee at sailing with the infamous pirate, Jason swallowed his objections and climbed aboard. At the least, perhaps their captain would have a store of rum in the hold. Considering how things were going, the one-time knight felt that he would soon need it.

His precognitive thoughts haunted him many times during their voyage at sea. The first occurrence took place when the uninformed members of their group learned their eventual destination – something that the infuriating miniature Argosian had conveniently omitted.

"I'm glad you could all come," Mr. Black announced to everyone once they had left port. "I hope that this trip will prove educational for each of you. We will be sailing to the closest port to Glastonbury, after which we will have a slight stop at the village itself before proceeding on to Avalon."

Jason, who was rather enjoying their Captain's supply of liquor, spat it back out as Sir Justin's eyes widened. "What?" he demanded incredulously.

Black seemed to miss the point of his protest as he replied, "I figured that we could all use some down time, and I needed to pick up some old spell books on the Isle of Mists."

Sir Justin nodded in agreement. "Verily, I am honored to join this quest, but I have never been to the revered Avalon and do not know the way."

Black smiled knowingly. "Not a problem," he answered. "I happen to know exactly where it is."

Jason still cringed at the unwavering respect and almost outright subservience that the other Knight held for Black and rolled his eyes yet again. 'More than a thousand years have passed and the man was still a trusting idiot!'

Another instance of Black being far more knowledgeable and skilled than he initially appeared came up when some fool had the idea to hold an archery competition on the fore deck. Blood was initially confused when Mr. Black requested that Green Arrow give him some pointers before they commenced. After all, if the man were truly an immortal from ages long past - as everyone believed -, he would surely be competent with the simple weapon.

He held his tongue, however, as the green-garbed goofball introduced the basics of archery and demonstrated the technique by hitting a passing bird before inviting their host to try it. The other man seemed to listen patiently throughout the lecture and, once he held the bow in his hands, smiled for an instant before releasing the bolt and sending it passing through the retreating flock of birds. While the arrow came close to the fowl, the shot failed to hit anything and continued arcing towards the Atlantic's surface.

"Well, that wasn't too bad for that distance," Speedy commented from an adjacent spot to his own at the stern. "I figured that he could still make the shot, though, being who he is and all."

Gallatea, who was practicing with the redheaded youth's bow, overheard his comment. The cloned metahuman glanced in the direction that Black's arrow had traveled and began to chuckle. "Who said he missed?" she asked archly.

Jason frowned and retrieved his binoculars. His eyebrows raised as the arrow he was tracking seemed to hit something and stay upright. Focusing a bit more, he noted that it had pierced the glass lens of a periscope. At their current positions, the demon-keeper estimated the distance at just under twice that of the bow's rated capacity.

As Queen Anne rapidly left the submarine behind, Jason watched as the apparently Atlantean vessel surfaced and its captain, the

renegade Lord Orm, emerged from the top hatch and began gesturing wildly. The knight chuckled darkly as a second 'wild' shot caught King Orin's traitorous brother right between the eyes - an almost impossible shot.

"Well, I guess that he's hijacked his last ship," Jason summarized with a satisfied grin as he turned the binoculars over to the squinting youth. 'As if that pampered prince could have out-pirated the renowned Blackbeard, reformed or not.'

As he expected, the question of the ship's unique design arose during their voyage. Oliver, who apparently had researched some of the pre-Victorian era designs, inquired as to why there were twenty cannons on each side of the vessel instead of the traditional thirteen. Black's reply was very brief; a woman of his acquaintance decided that it looked lopsided without that many.

It was that off-handed comment that finally convinced Jason of Black's identity as not only Death and the Black Knight, but Blackbeard as well. Even with modern record keeping, very few people knew that Edward Teach's consort at the time was the one to give him the idea for adding more cannons.

Jason was also able to put another mystery to rest. Despite the commotion that Intersall, Inc., had raised over the last few years, they had yet to prove that the few ship fragments recovered belonged to Blackbeard's Queen Anne's Revenge.

The entirety of the scheme suddenly coalesced in his mind, and even the resident demon was humbled at its simple effectiveness. After all, the only witnesses to the 'accident' that 'claimed' both Queen Anne and Adventure were Blackbeard and his crew. All he would have to do is hijack another couple of ships, run them aground on Beaufort Inlet, and claim that they were his top two pirate frigates. No one ever looked closer at the wreckages, and so believed that Blackbeard no longer posed a threat. As a result, he and his 'surviving' men were all awarded pardons from Governor Charles Eden at Bath, North Carolina. Now, he not only had his freedom, but his treasure and the best of his pirate fleet at his disposal as well.

Jason looked over at Black, who was teaching Kara how to pilot the ship, and laughed. It was such an ingenious and yet simple plan -

and it worked! Here they all were, standing aboard the Queen Anne's Revenge nearly three hundred years later, and not a soul was the wiser that the greatest pirate that ever lived still walked amongst them, thumbing his nose at their naiveté.

Dismissing his thoughts, Jason concentrated on the matter at hand; namely, the exploration of fabled Avalon. With Mr. Black involved, who knew what adventures were just around the bend?

It made him feel a thousand years younger.

"Whoa!" Flash exclaimed, before a look of confusion crossed his face. "Hey, what happened to my voice?"

"He's cooked his own brain," a sarcastic voice announced from behind him.

Wally turned around and saw Grodd strapped to some weird device. Giving a small shout of surprise, he spun around and ran to the other side of the room. "Okay..." Flash voiced aloud when he was winded after a short sprint, "something's really wrong here!"

"Lex?" Tala questioned as she approached the bent-over man. "You don't look at all well."

"Yeah, I'm just a little winded," he answered. The rest of the woman's statement finally registered, forcing the displaced Scarlet Speedster to face the sorceress. "Wait... did you just say 'Lex'?" he blurted.

"Psycho!" Rampage muttered as she made a circular gesture over one ear.

"Much has changed in 1,500 years," Sir Justin announced to Jason Blood once the group had exited the black hole into the outskirts of Glastonbury.

"I remember this entire area being a monstrous bog when our King did reclaim Lady Guinevere from King Melwas at the Tor," the other man agreed.

Jason grunted in acknowledgement. "The monks finished draining the swamp for farmland over a millennium ago," he answered shortly.

The group looked over the small village. "So, this is Glastonbury?" the younger archer voiced aloud. At receiving a few affirmative nods, he questioned, "Can we look around for a few minutes? I've read all sorts of things about King Arthur's exploits at this settlement, but I've never been able to come here until now. Is it true that Arthur was buried in Glastonbury Abbey after he and Mordred last fought?"

Having read of the bankrupt monks' convenient claims in his travel guide, Harry snorted. "Hardly," he denied immediately, "the monks who made that claim were strapped for money and invented that hoax to weasel out donations."

"So he really was buried on Avalon then?" the youthful archer inquired.

Harry shook his head with a slight smile. "Sorry, but no," he negated. "The King was interred near Avalon, however."

The younger archer frowned. "But if he isn't on Avalon, and he isn't at the Abbey, then what does that leave? The Chalice Well? The Tor?"

Harry raised one eyebrow and the youth sputtered. "You mean that King Arthur is really buried at the Tor?"

"Along with Guinevere and Merlin, yes," Harry acknowledged simply.

"I've walked all around the Tor," Jason exclaimed, "and I've never found them."

Harry chuckled. "Did you really think that Merlin would allow his adopted son to become a spectacle for people to gawk at and criticize? Their tomb is far out of the reach of those who would desecrate their memory." He grew silent as he recalled the many fond reminiscences in Merlin's journal.

Kara, noticing his melancholy, broke up the uncomfortable silence with her typical easygoing manner. "So, what's that over there?"

Harry shook off the recollection and followed her finger. "Oh, that's the Chalice Well gardens. Many people consider the gardens sacred. The grounds feed off the orange water that comes from an

underground pool called the Chalice Well. Most people agree that the water is colored due to its high iron content, since the rocks in the creek bed are stained orange. Others believe that Joseph of Arimathea hid the Holy Grail somewhere underground, and the water is orange due to Christ's blood that still runs through the water and gives it its healing properties. There was even some entertaining business a long time ago about the inhabitants using the Well in their fertility rites."

The wizard just shook his head at some peoples' gullibility. "In any event, the gardens are still very lovely to behold."

"Do we have time to look at them before we leave?" the blonde metahuman questioned.

Harry just shrugged. "If you all wish to explore, how about we meet atop the tower once you are done?"

"Awesome!" Courtney seconded. "That will give me a shot at those gift shops down there." Before anyone could speak up, the blonde girl was already jogging down towards the mercantile area.

Her father just shook his head at her ability to sniff out boutiques no matter where she was. "As for myself, I plan to take a closer look at the Abbey," Pat announced before he withdrew as well.

"Are any of the rest of you interested in coming to the Wells with us?" Harry asked the rest of the party. Zatanna and Gallatea spoke of in favor of the idea, but the remaining Leaguers declined and headed towards the Tor.

"So... that battle with King Melwas really happened, then?" Speedy asked the two knights as the quartet began climbing the path to the Tor.

"Indeed it did, my young friend," Sir Justin confirmed.

"It's certainly impressive, I'll give it that," the young archer admitted in reference to the stone tower as the group approached a set of stairs built into the face of the grassy hill.

Jason snorted. "If you think its impressive now, you should have been with us when we laid siege to the miserable heap of sod while measuring the snow in feet!"

"So," Oliver spoke up as they continued up the hill, "what exactly is the Tor, then?"

"You are standing upon it, my friend," Sir Justin explained. "It is naught but a triangular hill. The tower, however, is a whole different entity altogether."

"And a controversial one at that," Jason added. "Most people believe that it was originally a church – the church of Saint Michael."

"Michael as in the Archangel?" the blonde archer inquired.

"You know any other Saints named Michael?" the demon-possessed knight demanded crossly. Green Arrow held up his hands in surrender and the other man continued. "I can't vouch for that, but I do know that Melwas was using the tower as a watchtower fortress. At one point, it was even believed that the tower is sitting on a doorway to the underworld, though I never found any proof of it."

Shining Knight added to his knightly brother's comment, "Our Lord King was most persistent in conquering the tower, however, though he never explained why. Whether it is all a coincidence or not, I cannot say."

"Great..." the billionaire ground out slowly. "We're going on a magical field trip being led by either an angel or a death god, and we're headed towards a dimensional gateway reportedly leading to the Underworld. That's just swell! Well, at least it's got a nice view."

The blonde superhero was, if anything, understating matters. Having completed the 160-meter climb to the top of the hill, the group met with a truly spectacular display. On one side of the giant hill lay Glastonbury proper, which consisted mainly of village houses and small buildings. On the other side and farther away, however, lay the panorama of Somerset County.

The party unanimously approved when a brisk wind picked up, cooling them off after the dusty climb. Figuring that the others would

be a while in coming, the group wandered over towards the tourists milling about the base of the tower.

"Well, at least the old pile of stones itself is vacant," Jason muttered. "That should speed up whatever it is that Black's planning."

"Hey, look!" Speedy called out while waving some brightly colored brochure he had procured from one of the civilians. "This thing has all sorts of spooky information on the Tor. Apparently, paranormal stuff happens around here all the time, like UFO and ghost sightings."

Oliver dragged one hand down his face. "Speedy, UFO sightings aren't all that rare nowadays, and ghost stories are just that – stories."

"Not here, Mister," one old woman spoke up from the small crowd. "I've seen a ghost right on this very hill with my own eyes."

"Really?" the teenaged archer asked incredibly.

"Yessirree," she confirmed, "it was about ten years ago. I was walking back down the Tor one afternoon, just minding my lonesome, when I noticed a man in a long black cloak walking down about ten yards to my right. We didn't have these nice paths back then, I can tell you, so I paid him no never mind. Anyways, he passed behind a stand of trees and should have come out still parallel with me, but he didn't reappear. I stood and watched because he seemed to have just disappeared. Round about then I got suspicious, so I looked round behind the trees, but he wasn't there and there was nowhere else he could have gone to."

The woman took a breath and scratched the back of her head in confusion. "I know that seeing ghosts in full daylight is unheard of, but I can't find any other explanation."

"Really?" Jason inquired curiously. "Did you get a good look at him? Could you describe him for us?"

The woman frowned slightly. "It's the strangest thing. I was real close to him and could see him just fine but... I just couldn't make out what he looked like."

"You don't say," the knight offered in a neutral tone as he pondered just what Black would have been doing on the Tor a decade ago. "Thank you for your time."

"You're most welcome, young fellers," she replied easily. "Just a word of warning, though. You had better clear off the Tor before nightfall. Better still, get indoors if you can."

"Oh, and why is that, Ma'am?" Sir Justin questioned.

"The ghost of the Black Knight, of course!" she explained, as if it were common knowledge. "According to the stories, he's been haunting the Tor ever since King Arthur died way back when. Some say he's trying to destroy all the records of that time. Others disagree and think that he's trying to save whatever remnants Arthur left behind."

The group tried to hide their interest in this new tidbit about their current tour guide. "And what do you believe?" Speedy asked curiously.

The old woman preened. "Well, personally, I think that there's something up here that he's of a mind to protect. And if he's stood watch over this hill for nigh over 1,500 years, it must be something mighty important. From what I can tell, he shows up whenever someone gets a mischievous idea to commit tomfoolery 'round bout these parts. He's never really hurt anybody, but he's definitely put the fear of the Almighty into any vandals that happen by."

"Thanks for the tip," Oliver said. "We'll definitely be keeping a lookout for anybody wearing a dark cloak or suit of armor." As the woman drifted off again, Oliver turned to his teammates and muttered, "I'm going up top to wait for the others. All this folklore has got me curious."

Green Arrow led the way towards the stone steps and ascended to the pinnacle of the edifice. The more contemporary Leaguers were shocked to discover that the top of the tower consisted of little more than a single area no larger than a room and had no roof. The space had two exits to the circular parapet, one of which they stood in and the other led out the opposite side.

"Fancy," Speedy commented sarcastically as he looked around at the Spartan conditions. "Any idea why Mr. Black wanted to meet here?"

"Not a clue," the elder archer commented as he settled in to wait.

Approximately an hour later, the group reconvened atop the tower. After Courtney finally persuaded Harry to shrink her latest purchases for easier transportation, the dimension-hopping wizard ensured that his Muggle repellent charms were still functioning around the tower. Satisfied that any 'unnatural' proceedings would be kept secret from the public, Harry summoned his latest sword.

"All right, everybody, just close your eyes and we'll be there in a second," Harry announced as he lined the weapon up with the corresponding hole.

Several of those gathered did as they were bid, but Oliver hesitated and interjected, "Wait a sec! How are we-?"

Harry slid the blade home, interrupted the blonde archer in a pulse of magic and a blinding flash of light.

"-getting there?" Green Arrow finished bewilderedly.

"Whoa, that was bright!" Speedy exclaimed, openly admitting that he had watched the proceedings.

Harry replaced the sword in his gauntlet and leaned against one newly appeared marble pillar as he waited for the others to acclimate to their new surroundings.

The rest of the group was awkwardly attempting to inspect the rather unexpected displacement. Courtney ran one hand down the fluted pillar before turning to their guide and asking bewilderedly, "What just happened?"

"We were shifted into a sub dimension," Harry answered nonchalantly. "You might have heard them called pocket universes. Merlin moved Avalon out of your world when the Glastonbury monks started draining the fens several centuries ago."

The wizard patiently waited as the others struggled to accept all that they had just heard. When it seemed like he was in for a long wait, Harry began tapping his foot as he hummed a song Kara had introduced him to the previous day.

After catching several concerned glances, Kara leaned over and muttered, "Now probably isn't the best time to sing 'It's the End of the World', Joe."

Harry grinned apologetically. "Oh... sorry," he uttered sheepishly. His mind already moving to the next course of business, the wizard spoke briskly, "Alright, everyone, shall we get started?"

After another unsubtle hint from Speedy, Harry took the group by the basement crypt for a few minutes before leading them outside to the moored skiff. Once everyone was aboard, the wooden craft silently guided itself through the misty bog. While not quite as exhilarating as the Gringotts' carts, Harry still found the enchanted boat enjoyable. Sooner than he expected, his planning session on how to incorporate the mist ward and the reusable transportation on Black Island was interrupted by several gasps of surprise.

He looked up to find the mist disappearing in front of them, revealing an inviting beach surrounded by a thick forest. Harry immediately felt a sensation of familiarity, and it took him a few moments to place the memory. He had felt the exact same way back in his first year at Hogwarts when his detention led him to the Forbidden Forest. As the boat began beaching itself, his enhanced eyesight immediately spotted a small, winding trail leading further back into the woods.

"Alright, everyone out!" Harry called as the boat ground to a halt. "Let's get this party started."

"This place looks humongous!" Kara breathed excitedly as she kept turned her head to take in the entire scene. "There's no way that we can explore all of this before we run out of time," she added disappointedly.

Harry snorted in amusement before asking in an overly innocent tone, "Kara, do you have the time?"

The girl twisted her arm around and looked at her watch. "Sure, it's... hey! My watch is broken!"

"Mine, too," Courtney added dejectedly. "It was working just a minute ago, too."

Similar comments were uttered by most of the other people present. Their brainstorming session as to the possible reasons why was shortly cut off by a poorly suppressed guffaw from Harry.

"Alright, Joe, what did you do to our watches?" Kara demanded as she put her fists on her hips.

"Me?" he asked innocently. "I didn't do anything to them, mostly because there is nothing wrong with them for me to have done."

"Then why aren't they keeping time anymore?" she asked.

Harry's grin widened further as he replied, "Because time has been suspended in this place."

"You mean we're outside of time?" the redheaded archer demanded.

The wizard nodded. "Yep," he supplied, "we can stay here as long as you like and, when you're ready to leave, only a single second will have passed in the outside world."

Several of the group looked fascinated at the possibilities this offered. Kara, being her typical outspoken self, shared her own positive sentiment on the matter. "Awesome! That means that we won't miss the Halloween bash tomorrow night!"

Harry looked at the smaller girl curiously. "'Halloween bash'?" he parroted.

"Yeah!" she exclaimed. "You know, the last night of October, costumes, candy, that sort of thing. Don't you celebrate All Hallow's Eve? I figured that it'd be a big deal for you."

Harry shook his head negatively. "No, I've never exactly felt all that celebratory. Samhein brings back too many memories that are best left forgotten. The 'Ye Olde Powers of Darknesse' always seem to have something planned for that particular night, and it usually means more work for me. Besides, I don't really get all that many party invitations – at least, not from amongst the living. I think the

last Samhain celebration I attended was hosted by a ghost of my acquaintance; the company was entertaining, but I can't say that I would recommend the food or music."

"Well, we'll just have to make sure that this Halloween is a good one, then won't we?" she asked smilingly. "You know, singing, dancing... the whole spiel."

"Dancing?" Harry demanded disbelievingly while suppressing a rising sense of dread. "What is it with you females and dancing at every gathering, anyway? I never did understand the compulsion."

The girl had the audacity to smile at him! "Let me see if I can explain. You see, you start..."

As the expedition was walking along the path towards where Harry remembered the map indicating a settlement, they were accosted with a sudden shout from the shady glen. "Wait just a minute!"

Everyone turned in the direction the voice came from only to see an old man in robes, with wild white hair hanging down around his shoulders, a long nose, and a scraggly beard. "And just where do you think you're going, young man?"

Before Harry could work out if the elderly man – evidently a wizard – was addressing him, the stranger continued. "I hope that you weren't planning to head straight into town and forget to come see us." Gesturing in a flamboyant 'come hither' manner, the man approached Harry and invited, "Come, come! Bring your friends. Mustn't keep the missus waiting, or I'll never hear the end of it."

Harry shrugged at the others inquisitive expressions, unsure himself of what to do. He knew that he did not want to insult the old man but, given his usual luck in such matters, this encounter might be anything from an innocent greeting from a lonely old couple to some manipulative scheme by a barmy old codger. Following the senior citizen along a smaller and less clear trail, the group came upon a small clearing. Several small buildings took up the cleared area, with the exception of one slightly larger building offset from the rest. Given the man's heading, Harry surmised that the latter structure was his dwelling.

As he surmised, the stranger led them to the largest edifice and opened the door. Gesturing everyone inside with a spirited sweep of one arm, the short gentleman shouted, "Nem, we're home!" When the group hesitated at the doorstep, the man looked back and replied, "What? We have plenty of room! What do you think I am, some sort of meshungina?"

Kara giggled. "No, Sir! We're just a little surprised at how neat everything is."

"Bah!" the man said humorously. "My other half doesn't allow dust in her house, so never fear about that! And call me Ray; 'Sir' makes me feel old."

"That's because you are old!" a female voice announced the presence of the matron of the house. "Now, come on in, Dears. Ray, get out of their way!"

"I'm not in their way, woman!" the elderly Ray protested mischievously as he walked over to a well-worn chair.

"Come in, Dears," the woman repeated. "No need to huddle on the stoop! My name is Nem, by the way."

Harry, being a true Gryffindor, took several steps forward and was greeted by a spirited hug on par with Molly Weasley's finest. Without releasing him, the gray-haired woman turned to her husband and said, "See! I told you that he'd be by here today!"

"Alright already! I'll admit it; you were right!" the old man grumbled as the woman squeezed the young wizard again - much to his intense discomfort.

'Thrice damned shopkeepers!' Harry silently cursed while vowing to get back at every last one of them someday - in some way that could not be traced back to him, of course. He had not been on the island an hour yet and he had already encountered two people who were obviously expecting him. Now, Harry could envision two explanations for this occurrence: they recognized him because either they were Cassandra's Children or were entangled in this latest quest courtesy of yet another shopkeeper.

While Harry's mind occupied itself with searching how to escape this latest trap, Galatea's information gathering ears perked up at finally finding a personal contact to her objective. The old people here obviously recognized him, and it did not seem to be because he was a globetrotting uber metahuman, either.

The cloned woman decided to look around discretely with her x-ray vision in the hopes of unearthing some clue to the man's mysterious past. She reconsidered this plan almost immediately, however, when her vision immediately grew distorted. The deformation was so extreme that she felt a headache building just from witnessing the confusing scene. It was almost as if they were inside some sort of bend or fold, which prevented her superhuman gaze from penetrating any of the buildings.

After everyone had been made at home and been served tea, the old woman looked straight at Harry with a no-nonsense gaze. "Well, are you going to take that coat off so I can have a look at you, or am I going to have to force it off of you?"

Harry sputtered. "Excuse me?" he demanded.

"Oh, for all that's holy!" the woman exclaimed as she tossed up her arms. "I knew it! You were injured again and didn't treat it, didn't you? That's it! Into the bedroom now, Mister, I'm tending to it myself!"

Harry blinked. 'This was certainly outside of the norm,' he noted to himself.

"I assure you that I'm perfectly fine," he attempted to reassure the witch. "I haven't been in a serious scrap in months."

The old woman obviously did not heed his advice, however, as she grabbed Harry and dragged him towards a backless chair in her bedroom.

Her husband just shook his head, as the rest of the expedition looked rather shocked at the turn of events. "He really should know better than to argue with her by now."

Already on the look out for clues as to Black's identity, Jason Blood noticed that aside and questioned, "What do you mean?"

Ray smirked. "Oh, it's the same old story. He'll go out and patrol the world a few times, find some wrong to right, bite off more than he should, and then repeat the process until he finally gets hurt. Then, you have to browbeat him into having his wounds tended."

Oliver grinned. "I take it that he doesn't like being mothered?"

"Exactly!" the old man agreed. "He's got it in his head that he's invulnerable and that all the world's injustices are his personal responsibility to correct."

Ray looked thoughtful for a moment before adding, "Of course, it doesn't help that he practically is invulnerable where it counts. Believe it or not, we have three sisters who occasionally drop by with news from the outside worlds. They were telling us the other evening that, In the last year, he's faced down dragons, several breeds of demons, a hellmouth, just about every creature that goes 'bump in the night', and put down an entire Wizarding war – single-handedly. Don't even get me started on his and his brother's little romp with an insane Hell goddess a few months ago!" Ray frowned in thought for a moment. "Or was it a demon? It might have been a vampire, now that I think about it. Bah! Who can keep everything that goes on in that madhouse straight, anyway? In any case, our boy walks right up to the little rabble-rouser, calm as you please, and says, 'You don't belong here. Surrender or die.'"

Jason very nearly winced at Etrigan's booming laughter at Black's confidence. "So what happened then?" the demon's host asked.

The old man snorted. "Well, from what I heard, he or she or it – whatever - refused and started spouting off some prattle about setting the world on fire and feasting on the human cattle. Our boy in there just nodded, said 'Very well', and burnt her to a cinder! The next thing you know, this giant invading army numbering in the thousands takes one look at him and runs right back through the portal to Hell and closed it behind them."

"Well, that would explain why Joe decided to take a vacation!" Kara interjected.

"He's going by 'Joe' now?" Ray asked bemusedly.

"Err..." Kara hesitated, "I sort of decided that he needed a first name other than 'Mister' and that was the first one that came to mind."

The old man chuckled. "I like it. I think it suits him, in a strange way. In any case," he continued, "he's grown used to relying chiefly on himself, rather than endangering his friends. That is why I am so glad to hear that he met up with your League. He has never had a firm grasp on the more positive emotions such as love and friendship, and we were beginning to fear that he would withdraw from human contact altogether."

Ray leaned forward and met the eyes of every one there. "For what it's worth, you have the gratitude of a couple of old people for treating him like an average member of your group. He's normally met with either awe or fear, and it gets to him more than he lets on," the elder explained to his young guests.

While the old man had been giving their group his heartfelt monologue, both Jason and Galatea had kept one eye on the losing battle between Nem and their guide. The old woman had already removed Mr. Black's coat and shirt and was methodically inspected his torso for damage. It was obvious he was uncomfortable with this, but was unwilling to harm the old woman in any way.

Jason, who had concealed a miniature camera in his armored vest, was carefully recording Mr. Black's exposed chest for future analysis. Even from a distance, the one-time knight could see both scarring and bruising along the man's upper body. While such information meant little to him, Jason was well aware that his pointy-eared teammate would be anal enough to categorize every blemish and attempt to correlate them with historical accounts to prove or disprove the other man's identity. The Batman's single-minded drive to accomplish his goal was, in fact, the chief reason why Etrigan so enjoyed being around the Dark Knight.

While performing her own reconnaissance, Galatea also noticed the scarring on their teammate's upper body. In fact, her keen vision allowed her to notice that one such scar on his back – possibly caused by a sword, judging from its clean edges and general size – lined up perfectly with a similarly sized scar on his chest.

The blonde clone felt her eyes widen voluntarily when she realized that, if one blade had truly created both scars at the same time, the sword would have gone straight through the man's heart!

Not for the first time, Galatea wondered if Belle Reeve was such a terrible place after all.

"Listen," Harry protested as the old woman was rubbing some kind of salve over all of his visible scars, "this really isn't necessary!"

She clucked and continued to apply the cream. "You should take better care of yourself, you know," she commented, completely ignoring his rebuttal. "And you should get yourself a wife instead of running all over the world! Do you think that we'll be around forever? I want to see some great-grandchildren!"

'Oh!' Harry realized as the metaphorical penny dropped. 'These two aren't in league with the Shopkeepers. They just mistook me for their missing grandson.'

He briefly considered setting the old couple straight, but the plan was quickly scrapped by his 'saving-people-thing'. Harry finally decided that it would be better if he said nothing and let them believe that their grandson was still alive and well, at least for the interim.

While his wife was attending to Harry, Ray was looking carefully at both Kara and Galatea. Reaching a decision, he hoisted himself out of his chair and beckoned the two blonde-haired women to follow him. "You know, I think I've got something in the attic that the two of you could use. The rest of you make yourselves at home while we're gone. If you want, you can use the far viewer."

After the trio had left, Courtney looked at the remaining six Leaguers and commented, "Well, this is kinda disappointing."

Oliver looked over at the 'far viewer' with a speculative glint. Wondering if the elderly couple had a cable box attached to the high-definition Plasma television dominating one wall, the billionaire archer shook his head. "Don't knock it just yet. They might just have a game on."

"Attention, all decks!" Mr. Terrific announced over the Watchtower's public address system. "This is a station-wide alert! Lex Luthor has control of Flash's body. Contain him at any cost. Use whatever force is necessary."

"I don't want him hurt," Green Lantern stated gruffly.

"That's not the problem," the other man replied grimly before showing a real-time security video of a dozen League members already disabled. "I've tracked Flash's ID badge. It looks like he's hiding in a storage room."

"C'mon!" Lantern admonished as he lifted off the ground.

"Just you and Fate," the League's controller negated. "There's something weird about this."

"Fine!" John bit out before Dr. Fate and he flew towards the storage locker in question. Once the pair arrived in the staging area, however, they only found Wally's ID badge and comm. device.

Huffing in irritation, Lantern activated his comm. unit. "Yeah, it was a trick," he grumbled.

"It figures!" Mr. Terrific replied. "I've sent extra muscle to the backup teleport pads, G.L. You and Red Tornado cover the Javelin bay."

As Fate sequestered himself to research a spell to reverse the mind swap, John sighed resignedly and went towards the League's transportation hub.

Time flew by - relatively speaking - and the group engaged in many adventures, both together and apart.

Kara and Galatea had each received their own wands from Ray, although they received their magical tutoring primarily from Harry, Zatanna, and Jason. While neither of the girls had much patience for the higher-level Transfiguration and Charms spells, they took enthusiastically to the various hexes, curses, and defensive spells that the mage trio demonstrated for them.

Harry discovered that Nem was a rather accomplished swordswoman in her day. As it turned out, the old woman was far

nimbler than her elderly exterior indicated, and she taught the young wizard much in the realm of swordplay. Once they had exhausted her skills in the 'blade' arts, his instructor contacted her younger cousins Artie and Thena to arrange for an advanced tutorial in archery and tactics, respectively. Harry soon found the redheaded archer to be extremely spirited and often brash – especially when it involved interacting with men –, but she eventually warmed to him and the pair came to enjoy the lessons. Thena, on the other hand, was always a perfect example of composure and etiquette. In fact, Harry came to believe that she represented an older version of Hermione, given the blond woman's studious demeanor and frequent morality lectures.

Nem also supplied him with her family's crest – a curious bronze casting of a lightning bolt in front of a storm cloud. Once he attached the token to his coat, the village's elders were more than happy to grant him and his friend's duplicates of various books in their library. The fact that a remote township had such modern technology as a photocopier came as quite a shock, but the wizard was delighted to find a magical settlement that had progressed beyond the dark ages.

During the course of his stay, Harry succeeded in combining the duplicated texts with what he learned from Merlin's diary to perfect his self-transfigurations – or his 'changing' ability, to use Merlin's terminology. Among many interesting discoveries, Harry confirmed that the Count's prediction as to his Animagus form was correct. When he brought his 'inner animal' to the fore rather than consciously forcing himself into a form of his own choosing, the wizard became a large black wolf. Much to his private appreciation, he found that his animal form held many similarities to the late Padfoot in both size and coloring.

Sir Jason and Sir Justin kept themselves amused for the duration mainly by discussing long-ago battles with several of the island's resident knights. As one might expect from such a gathering, this conglomeration resulted in many tournaments reminiscent of days gone by.

Not to be outdone, both archers quickly became acclimated to the different culture. Shortly into their stay, Green Arrow packed his uniform away and began dressing in a Lincoln green leather outfit and a hooded leather jerkin. His arsenal also received an upgrade of sorts when he replaced his high-tech equipment with a handcrafted

Yew bow and an old-fashioned quiver of arrows. In addition, Oliver began wearing a sword at his side at all times. When questioned about the change, he replied that he won his new gear in a competition and that it would serve him better than his old stuff. Given the likely magical origin of his new equipment, Harry did not doubt that he would be better prepared should another Eiling situation arise in the future.

His former apprentice followed Oliver's example of changing his outfit and weaponry, including the addition of a sword. However, unlike the Green Arrow's selection, Speedy chose to don a dark, close-fitting leather outfit. Additionally, the youthful archer equipped himself with a large assortment of weaponry, ultimately giving the impression of a medieval Batman.

Pat Dugan went through the trip with mixed feelings. While the other mages used the library to research the mystical arts, Pat used his perpetual library pass to review a great many rare historical and technical documents. This unexpected honor made the single father very happy, but his joy was tempered with the knowledge that Mr. Black's 'charity' allowed his daughter to purchase an amazing quantity of 'souvenirs'.

After an indeterminate time had passed, the group decided that it was time to rejoin the outside world. Making their goodbyes to their new friends in town, Ray and Nem escorted the group to the lake's edge where, after many admonishments to return soon, they sailed back towards the Tor and the exit of the realm.

After the leaguers left, the old woman turned to her husband. "Well, I told you that my grandson was a good boy," she pointed out smugly.

Rao chuckled as he let his disguise go, resuming the appearance of a handsome blonde-haired man in his prime. "Yes, you did, and yes, he is. I cannot fault his taste in friends either. With any luck, perhaps one of my two granddaughters will marry the boy. They both seemed quite comfortable around him as he taught them magic."

Nemesis rolled her eyes as her form began to age in reverse. "Even a blind person can spot how smitten Kara is with him," she commented in a rich contralto. "I believe that you will need to search elsewhere for Galatea's match."

The Kryptonian Sun God laughed aloud. "Well, it's not as if they want for time. As long as the girls stay under a yellow sun, they are as immortal as my old pantheon. Not to mention your grandson; considering his ties to both Tyche and yourself, can he even be destroyed?"

The Goddess of Vengeance smiled in a satisfied manner. "No, I don't think so," she answered cheerfully. "From what the Fates told me, he'll be fighting the good fight for a very long time to come."

Nemesis diverted her attention as two women approached the pair of deities. "Hello, Athena. Artemis. You just missed them."

"I know," the Goddess of Wisdom replied, "but we were detained by a meeting with Zeus."

"Oh?" Rao inquired idly. "And what was Mr. 'Hey-you-get-off-of-my-cloud' so excited about?"

"Well, it actually concerns you – this time," Athena supplied dryly. "It has come to Olympus's attention that your descendent Kal-El is affianced to a mortal woman."

Rao nodded in affirmation. "Yes... a colleague of his at his human job. Her name is Lois Lane, I believe."

"Correct," she avowed. "Someone also rather inappropriately informed him that the Amazonian champion Diana has her eye on the mortal calling himself Batman."

"I said that I was sorry!" Artemis blurted. "He just kept going on about the Amazon's 'no men' policy, and it just slipped out before I realized it."

Nemesis smiled brightly. "Oh, yes, the Dark Knight of Gotham," she recalled. "Nice man, holds righteous vengeance in high esteem. I think that the two of them will make a nice match."

"Well, your king does not," Athena answered wryly, "and wants Rao here to drop by to discuss pairing her with Kal-El."

"You have got to be joking!" he protested bemusedly. "Has he ever watched them interact? They're all but siblings!"

"I know," the goddess replied tiredly. "I think that was his point, to be honest."

The tall man snorted. "Don't worry about it, 'Thena'," he responded in a teasing tone. "I'll drop by later and set him straight. And speaking of setting people straight, are you sure that we shouldn't have just told the kids just who is in their family tree? They're bound to figure it out sooner or later. I mean, your grandson even has Zeus's own mark on his forehead where that death curse failed!"

"Very sure," Nemesis answered resolutely. "None of them like being the center of attention, Harry least of all. Not to mention that they're only children. Let's give them a chance to enjoy the lives they lead. After a century or two, they'll start feeling less attached to the mortal world and then we can inform them of their heritage."

"Well," Artemis interrupted smoothly, "since that little chore is out of the way, who's up for a little celebrating the next generation? I, for one, would like to try this 'coffee' that my nephew mentioned so fondly."

Laughing at the several stressed warnings they had received from their other guests about Harry's reaction to anything caffeinated, the four Celestial beings disappeared from the shores of Avalon in search of java.

After returning to the mainstream Tor, Harry provided a Black Hole to bring the group back onto the Watchtower. Having had several months to acclimate themselves to the man's more eccentric displays of power, the group traversed the portal without hesitation. Unfortunately, the wizard's luck was as strong as ever, for just as soon as Harry had replaced the Hole in his coat, an urgent message was emitted from the overhead speakers.

"Attention, all decks!" a male voice he identified as being Mr. Terrific announced. "This is a station-wide alert! Lex Luthor has control of Flash's body. Contain him at any cost. Use whatever force is necessary."

Harry sighed. "It's always something, isn't it?" he demanded resignedly.

Kara smiled slightly. "You know you'd miss it otherwise." She looked off for a second before adding, "Incoming."

By then, Harry's enhanced hearing had already identified an approaching racket as belonging to Flash's body running at super speed. Gesturing for his companions to stay behind him, Harry backed up against one side of the corridor and retrieved one of the Weasley twins' inventions. Just as Flash-Luthor appeared at the end of the corridor, the wizard tossed the portable quicksand bog out onto the floor. His timing could not be any more impeccable as the possessed superhero did not even register the hazard before he was completely trapped.

Smiling darkly, Harry petrified the scarlet form before levitating him out of the bog. A small burst of magic from a gauntlet immediately removed the mire, leaving Flash's body to dangle helplessly in front of one extremely irritated wizard.

"You know, Luthor," Harry said in a conversational tone, "I normally have to have to track you people down myself. I do believe that you're the first client to actually seek me."

A muffled noise came from the bound man's chest.

"Oh, I'm not going to kill you, although your sins have certainly earned that fate," Harry replied as if he understood what the man was attempting to communicate. "You are in my friend's body at the moment, after all. Now, I know that Flash doesn't have any extra mental abilities, and I'm fairly certain that you don't either. That means that someone has been meddling in things they shouldn't be."

Harry's eyes narrowed at the thoughts of another Legilimens running loose. "Come with me and we'll straighten this out," the mage ordered snidely as he cast a Mobilicorpus on the restrained body. The mismatched duo led the rest of the expedition group to the bridge, where a surprised Mr. Terrific summoned Dr. Fate and Green Lantern.

After Harry gave the helmeted magician a dressing down for his poor judgment and spell execution, the immortal wizard brought Flash's body to hover before the other man. While Dr. Fate performed the spell to correct his mistake, Harry established eye

contact with the arch criminal and intoned coldly, "Know this. When next we meet, that day shall be your last."

A few moments later, Dr. Fate finished his incantation and Wally West was restored to his original body. Realizing that the exchange had been made, Harry stepped back and cancelled his spell.

"Guys!" the Scarlet Speedster exclaimed. "I was starting to think that I'd go out at the bottom of a super villain dog pile!"

"It sounds like Wally," John Stewart hesitated, "but is there any way to be sure?"

"You want proof?" Wally asked with a certain amount of excitement. "Until he went off into the Marines, G.L.'s nickname was-"

"Stop!" the Lantern in question interrupted. "It's him," John announced to the group. He then glared at Flash and bit out, "You promised never to repeat that story!"

Smiling smugly, the redhead leaned back in his chair. "I know," he replied impishly. "I was just messing with your head."

"Well, can you tell us anything about Grodd's secret society?" Mr. Terrific demanded. "Where's their headquarters?"

Wally shrugged. "I don't know. In a swamp?"

Several of the gathered Leaguers groaned in unison.

After learning of her acceptance into the League and eventually making her excuses, Galatea discreetly left the Watchtower and flew to a certain residence in one of Washington D.C.'s outlying suburbs. Entering a code into the secured skylight, the blonde-haired woman entered the house and stealthily made her way into lower recesses of the dwelling.

The metahuman's rifling of the home's refrigerator was interrupted by the sudden activation of the overhead lights and a sarcastic, "Make yourself at home!"

"Hey, Waller!" Galatea greeted through a mouthful of turkey. "You know, this bird's rather dry. Still good, though."

"Is there a reason why you're gracing my home?" Amanda Waller demanded from the doorway leading to what appeared to be a living room. "And how did you get in here without setting off the alarms?"

The blonde clone tapped the side of her head significantly. "Cadmus," she answered shortly, "and I'm giving you your report on Black."

"Already?" the short woman questioned disbelievingly. "I was under the impression that it would take several days at the minimum."

"It did," the younger woman responded. "In fact, it took about three months for me to get a complete feel for the man."

"Three months?" Waller echoed, the demand for a clarification evident in her tone.

The metahuman proceeded to inform the other woman of her transdimensional vacation with her target, sister, and teammates. After many requests for clarification, she resumed devouring the leftover turkey while the Secretary of Metahuman Affairs pondered what she had just learned.

"So," the squat former Cadmus operations manager beckoned, "what is your assessment of the target? Were the rumors accurate?"

Galatea snorted. "Personally, I don't think they do him justice. If anything, they omit his more... impressive abilities."

"I meant in terms of hostility against the United States," Waller clarified.

The blonde woman shook her head. "He doesn't like harming people and will not do so unless forced." She thought over the many little conversations she had held with him before continuing. "I noticed that he doesn't trust politicians," she admitted, "but he would prefer to just ignore them as opposed to annihilating them. He won't attack simply because he dislikes the administration."

"Well, the President will greatly appreciate that sentiment," Amanda acknowledged.

The other woman was not yet finished, though. "However," she continued, "I believe that sponsoring such an immoral organization as Cadmus would definitely raise his ire, no matter how well the paper trail might be hid."

"Is that so?" Waller questioned.

"Yes," Galatea replied seriously. "He doesn't believe in using his power for selfish pursuits. It simply isn't in his nature. However, if he became aware of a threat needlessly endangering innocent lives – like your attempts to play God –, I do not doubt that he would intervene."

A rueful smile briefly graced her face as she relived certain sparring sessions on Avalon, as well as the gossip the old couple shared on his earlier exploits. Satisfied that Waller was paying complete attention, Galatea added, "And should he truly get irritated, no force on this planet could stop him."

A/N: Thus concludes Chapter Eight of Terminal Justice, at a detailed 16,000 words. In spite of its verbosity, I hope that you found this latest entry entertaining. I drastically shortened the original Justice League episode (mostly because I felt that it contributed little to the overall storyline), but I hope you found that the lengthy journey to Avalon made up for it.

I am particularly interested in receiving your opinions as to how much/little the Greek deities should play in future encounters. In particular, I have a humorous scenario involving Harry being called to Paradise Island and running afoul of some plot by Hades and/or Ares, all the while ducking the ultra-feminist Amazons.

I would like to express my gratitude for Luinlothana's 'Learning Possibility' drabble at the beginning of the chapter, as well as Chris' addition of 'Expedition'. Additionally, kudos for anyone who caught the references I worked in from Chris's BtVS crossover fic.

Additionally, thanks go out to James for his insightful beta reading and helpful suggestions.

The next chapter will cover the all-female 'Grudge Match', as well as the repercussions of the expedition. I've considered including an Etrigan/Black/Morgan leFay incident, but I am unsure as to whether

she is still a villain or not. In any event, your opinions on the next episode are welcome.

As always, your helpful feedback is appreciated.

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Chapter 9: Trick or Treat by Overkill

Next Chapter

Disclaimer: This is a cross between JLA (Season 5) and Rorschach's Blot's Make A Wish Story. Harry Potter is owned by JK Rowling and various publishers. Henchgirl, The Professor, and other such objects are Rorschach's creation. DC Comics own the Justice League and associated characters/plot devices. The lack of plot, however, can be attributed to me.

Trick or Treat

After ensuring that Flash was all right, the group made their goodbyes and separated for the evening. With a sudden lull in his schedule, the mage transported himself to his quarters and began going through the gifts he had received from the kind Avalonians.

Separating out the more theoretical texts, Harry duplicated the books for his friends before calling Henchgirl on his Zippo.

"Long live King Harry the First!" the questionably insane woman greeted enthusiastically.

Harry rubbed at his temples to relieve the sudden tension while simultaneously wishing that he could conjure coffee on demand. "I am certain that I requested that you not do that," Harry responded steadily.

A throat cleared itself over the magical device. "Uhm... you might've mentioned it," Henchgirl admitted in a more subdued tone.

Harry just shook his head in silent resignation. "Anyway," he spoke up, "I wanted to let you know that I made a trip by Avalon earlier and picked up a few books that you and the Doctor might enjoy reading."

"Avalon?" the female inventor demanded excitedly. "Really? You have to tell me all about it! Please?" she finished in a pleading whine.

"Alright," Harry interrupted her begging. "It all started out with another one of those bloody shopkeepers..."

After many demands for repeats or clarifications, Harry finally finished with, "and after we got Flash straightened out, I came back to my room and called you."

"That's incredible!" his friend exclaimed. "See? I knew that you getting that sword was a good thing!"

"Yes, yes," Harry grumbled, "it did lead me right to Avalon's doorstep."

"That's right!" she said smugly. "Now, about those books..."

Harry blinked. "Oh, right. Here they come," he warned before stuffing the reference materials into the green flame.

"Oof!" the witch replied breathlessly. "That last one weighs a ton! What is it?" The connection went silent for a few moments before she spoke up quietly. "Is this what I think it is?"

"If you are referring to the private memoirs of one of the greatest wizards of all time – who was also apparently the greatest exiled Atlantean cook of all time –, then yes," Harry agreed calmly as he carefully kept his amusement out of his reply.

An odd shrieking noise echoed from the connection and cut off any additional comments he might make. "This is incredible!" she exclaimed distractedly to the tune of pages turning. "There are all sorts of theories in here! Remarkable!"

Harry nodded before realizing that his friend could not see the gesture. "Yes, it is," he agreed verbally. "If you would give a copy of those to the Doctor and the Professor, I'd appreciate it. I think that they'll both get a kick out of it."

"I'll say," she confirmed. "Some of these titles disappeared from the Wizarding World centuries ago! And to think, all this has been hidden away on Avalon for nearly two millennia."

The wizard smiled at his friend's enthusiasm. "I'm glad that I could be of service, then," Harry commented in a pleased manner. "Unfortunately, none of those books can help me with my current dilemma."

"What's wrong?" Henchgirl demanded worriedly.

Harry rushed to reassure the woman. "Nothing life threatening," he supplied. "It's just that Halloween is tomorrow night and Kara wants to have this... costume party."

"Yes..." the woman interjected with far too much interest for Harry's comfort.

"Yeah," he repeated, "and there's going to be dancing and, if she can arrange it, singing."

"Oh, that sounds marvelous!" the inventor squealed happily.

Feeling dejected at the realization that his friend was in the enemy camp on this issue, Harry grumbled, "Except for the fact that I don't have a costume, I can't sing to save my life, and I've danced all of once – and it was horrible."

"No biggie!" Henchgirl replied immediately. "I had whipped up a costume for you months ago. I thought that we might have a little celebration here, but since you're not going to be here with us..."

Harry smiled as one third of his problem disappeared. "You're the best!" he praised.

"I know," the witch replied modestly, "I know, and I'll think you'll like it. I patterned it after a real character, too. It involves taking a potion, though," she added easily.

"You're not referring to that potion that hid everything except my skeleton, are you?" he asked worriedly. "That concoction still occasionally acts up when I get really angry."

"No, no, nothing like that," she said reassuringly. "I made this costume into a bracelet like your disguise bangle. I patterned this outfit after a legendary guardian figure that you remind me of from time to time. The potion just helps you sing... it's sort of part of the character."

"Oh?" Harry asked curiously. "Do I know this celebrity?"

"I don't think so, but I know that you won't be disappointed," she said enthusiastically. "Anyway, once you replace your existing arm band with this one, you can just think of which disguise you want to have. Right now, you can choose from 'Harry Potter', 'Mr. Black', and 'Halloween Costume'."

Hoping for the best, Harry decided to trust the woman. "Alright, Henchgirl, I'll try it, and I appreciate your help. Now if there was just some way to magically learn how to dance by tomorrow night, I'd be all set."

"Hmm..." the inventor mused to herself. "I think that the dancing problem will be easily solved. Just use your universal remote control with my D.D.R. game – that will solve your problem for sure!"

"D.D.R.?" the wizard parroted awkwardly. "What's that?"

"Why, Dance Dance Revolution!" she answered in a chipper tone. "I've customized it, of course."

"Of course," Harry murmured in reply as he tried to explain the sudden feeling of dread. "And this... game will teach me to dance?" he asked confusedly.

Amidst the odd sound of two hands rubbing together in glee, the Potions Mistress replied, "Yep! Guaranteed!"

"Alright," he answered resignedly, "I'll give it a shot."

"Great!" she shouted. "Incoming, one costume and one dancing tutor!"

A moment later found Harry holding another bracelet in addition to a potion vial and an odd-looking device made out of plastic. The platform object seemed to have numerous indentions set into the top face without any set pattern. Forcing down another wave of uneasiness, Harry confirmed that he received the package.

After some truly disconcerting chuckles, the witch replied, "Capital! Now that that's out of the way, we can discuss the real issue at hand."

Going back over their conversation, Harry was unable to identify any topics that had not already been resolved. Oddly enough, his finely tuned 'danger sense' seemed to be peaking suddenly.

"What issue are you talking about, Henchgirl?" he asked confusedly.

He could practically hear the wolfish grin that the woman was sporting as she intently asked, "Who's Kara?"

Harry blinked as the reason for his discomfort was announced. 'Bugger!'

"It's no good," Lex Luthor grumbled as yet another experiment to revive Brainiac failed. "It isn't enough! This is the last remnant of Brainiac, but there isn't enough to work with!"

As had happened many times before, the remaining echo of Brainiac spoke directly to his conscious mind. "Perhaps if you constructed a positronic event chamber," the intangible artificial intelligence offered.

"Yes... yes, that could work... but where would I get the money?" Luthor replied aloud, oblivious to Tala's resigned gaze. "Between the government's seizing my assets and the cost of running this Secret Society..."

Tala leaned over to the approaching Sonar and whispered, "He's talking to his imaginary friend again."

"You're a resourceful human, Luthor," Brainiac assured the criminal genius. "I'm sure you'll find a way."

A clearing throat interrupted the bald man's introspection a few moments later. Looking over his shoulder, Lex grumbled, "What is it, Sonar?"

"Are you busy?" the nonobservant villain asked. "Roulette wants to-"

A woman clad in a revealing red dress interrupted him. "I'm more than capable of speaking for myself," the villainess chastised. Moving up to lean against a nearby console, she continued, "Lex, darling, I'm having some serious financial issues and I'm afraid that you're to blame."

"Well, don't look at me to bail you out, Roulette," he replied. "I skim you, remember."

"You know that I don't like to complain, Lex, but... you are taking a much bigger cut of the gross than Grodd ever did, and Metabrawl receipts are down."

Luthor turned back to his terminal and began starting the next trial. "I've seen the books," he responded gruffly.

"Now, don't think me ungrateful," the female fight manager soothed, "but you've been poaching all the best fighters for your so-called Secret Society."

"Pity," he sneered while still outwardly ignoring the brown-haired woman. "Cut to the chase, Roulette. What do you want?"

The woman smiled and drew up to Luthor's side. "If I could only have a few star attractions in the ring," she began while rubbing the mastermind's arm, "Bizarro... Sinestro... maybe Bizarro versus Sinestro!"

A flash of purple light shot between the two and forced the scantily clad woman several paces away from Luthor's position. "Back off, Hot Pants!" Tala ordered. "Give the man some space!"

"You're playing with fire, Witch!" Roulette challenged as she crouched in a ready position.

"Who's playing?" the sorceress fired back as she prepared to curse the other woman again.

"Tala!" Lex exclaimed as he stepped between the two feuding females.

"Aw, let them go at it for a minute," Sonar pleaded.

"There's not going to be any fighting!" Luthor ordered. At seeing the man's downcast expression, the genius smiled and added, "At least, not here. Sonar, I think you've given me the answer to Roulette's problem... and mine as well."

Roulette's eyes widened. "Of course!" she agreed as she caught onto Luthor's train of thought. "The new Metabrawl – all girl fights, all the time! We'll call it 'The Glammer Slam', or 'The Belles of the Brawl'."

"Chick-a-palooza!" Sonar threw in pathetically before being cowed by three glares.

"With the right backing, it's a million dollar idea, a cash cow!" Roulette exclaimed. "But even this won't work if the girls are all second-string villains."

Luthor raised one eyebrow sinisterly. "Who said anything about villains?"

"John, I'm starving," Timothy Hunter informed his escort when the man grew silent.

John Constantine rolled his eyes before mentioning, "You can have breakfast at our next port of call – and sanctuary, too, with any luck."

"Where are we going now?" the young potential wizard demanded crossly. "Another one of your 'old friends'?"

The paranormal investigator smirked. "As it happens, yes."

The younger man sighed before asking, "What's his name?"

"Her name," Constantine stressed, "is Zatanna."

Timothy's eyes widened. "Zatanna? The Lady Magician? I've seen her on TV and everything! You know her? Wow!"

John's smirk widened. "As it happens, I used to know her quite well."

"Oh," Hunter said dejectedly, "oh, dear."

"What's that meant to mean?" John demanded crossly.

Timothy huffed slightly. "Just that judging by the way things have gone so far, she'll be a weirdo who hates you."

John laughed at the boy's accurate summary of their journey to date. "Nah," he reassured his traveling partner, "me and Zatanna, like that we are."

Not to be denied, Timothy continued, "I expect you probably pinched her best trick, or killed her brother or something."

"Father," John answered flatly, "I killed her father – or at least, I was responsible for his death. We were trying to save the world."

"And did you?" Timothy predictably inquired.

"God alone knows, Tim," the older man responded, "and even He's probably still a little uncertain about the final outcome."

John suddenly stopped in front of a modest, two-story dwelling. "This is her house," he supplied when Tim looked at him inquiringly.

"Are you sure this is a good idea?" the young wizard-to-be demanded again.

John let out a bark of laughter. "No, but the trench coat brigade would never talk to me again if we gave up now." He rang the doorbell and waited as the sound of footsteps drew nearer. The door opened moments later to reveal the casually dressed form of Zatanna the Enchantress.

"John? John Constantine?" the Lady Magician exclaimed loudly before embracing the man. "John, it's wonderful to see you! What brings you to San Francisco?"

"Um... hullo, Zatanna," John greeted hesitantly in the face of the woman's far more energetic welcome.

Releasing the man, the magician continued, "Come on in. It must be what, two years? Who's your friend?"

"I'm Tim. Timothy. Timothy Hunter," the boy stammered nervously in the face of the world-famous entertainer and superheroine. "I saw you on Jonathan Ross."

Zatanna frowned in thought for a moment. "That guy who does Letterman in England? Yeah, that was fun! So, what are you doing here with my off-white knight, then?"

"Tim has the potential to be the greatest magician that the modern world has ever seen. So me, and Doc Occult, and the Stranger, and the nut from Boston-"

"Who?" Zatanna interrupted.

"He calls himself Mister E," Constantine explained.

"Oh, yeah," the witch exclaimed in sudden recollection.

John continued. "Well, we've got together and we're showing him stuff. The idea is that he learns enough about the world of magic to decide whether that's what he wants from life or not."

Zatanna smiled. "Sounds like fun."

"Only trouble is, people are trying to kill him," he explained, "so we're trying to find somewhere safe to hole up until the whole thing blows over. We tried Baron Winter, but he threw us out."

"Why, of course you can stay here," she inferred. "I'd be delighted to have you. Tim can sleep in the spare bedroom..." Zatanna train of thought wavered for a moment before she announced, "Oh, and John, there's a letter for you on the table over there."

"A letter?" Constantine repeated confusedly.

Zatanna nodded in confirmation. "Yeah. The envelope was there when I came down this morning. Weird, huh?" As the man went off to read his mail, the witch turned her attention to her other houseguest. "Great looking owl, Tim. Did you make him yourself?"

"No," Tim shook his head, "Dr. Occult did." The fan boy's attention soon drifted back to the celebrity in question. "I couldn't believe it when you made the flowers grow out of Jonathon Ross's ears."

"Bugger. Blast. Damn. Fleching heck..." Constantine cursed. Walking back into the room, he addressed Zatanna. "Look, take

care of Tim until I get back, can you, Love? Bloody hell! Honestly! You can't leave them alone for five minutes..."

"John?" Zatanna called out in confusion. "Wh-where are you going?"

Not pausing from his swift march towards the exit, he called back, "India. Calcutta, probably. Seeya, Darlin'. Bye, Tim."

"India?" the witch screeched. "John Constantine, you limey dork..." Settling down, she sighed. "Oh, what's the use?"

Timothy looked uncomfortable. "Look," he said, "I'm sorry about this. I can go."

"No," she discarded his suggestion immediately, "you're twelve and they're trying to kill you." Changing topics, she asked, "When did you last eat?"

The boy looked thoughtful for a moment. "I'm not sure," he finally admitted. "Traveling with him, time goes really funny, if you know what I mean."

"Mm," Zatanna deliberated, "and I doubt you've had a shower since you left England. So, if you head upstairs, you'll find the bathroom on your left, and I'll have breakfast ready for you when you come down."

Black Canary sighed in relief as the perpetrator she was perusing ducked into a dead alley. It had been a long night, and she was tired of chasing the purse-snatcher all over Gotham's seamier side.

"Nowhere to run, nowhere to hide!" the blonde woman called as the man skidded to a halt at the imposing block wall. Jumping off her perch on the fire escape, Dinah Lance approached the other individual with plans of quickly dispatching the thug and then catching some sleep.

Unfortunately, she had to postpone her relaxation plans when the person got a lucky shot in to her jaw that floored her smaller figure. Grimacing, she climbed back to her feet and tackled the man to the floor of the dingy alley.

As Dinah was struggling to overpower the larger figure, the sonic siren heard a catty, "Need a hand, Canary?"

Looking up, the blonde woman caught sight of a casually lounging Huntress, who appeared to be enjoying the spectacle before her. "Not from you, Huntress," she growled. Her momentary distraction proved unwise, however, as the male criminal took the opportunity to punch the woman again and attempt an escape.

"Suit yourself," the brunette crime fighter acquiesced as she crossed her arms and leant against the concrete block wall of the alley.

Seeing an apparent opening, the man took off and rounded the first corner out of sight.

"I've never seen you so sloppy," Huntress chastised the other woman. "What's the deal?"

"Get out of my way!" Canary shouted as she tried to catch the fleeing criminal.

Huntress ignored the blonde, however, choosing instead to send a nearby trashcan lid colliding into the back of the man's head Frisbee style. With that particular problem unconscious, the black and purple clad woman turned her attention back to the obviously impaired Black Canary.

"I don't need your help, Huntress!" Dinah insisted heatedly.

"Riiiiiight," the other woman drew out sarcastically. "You were doing an excellent job of getting your butt handed to you. What'd he do, anyway?"

"Stole a wallet," Dinah admitted groggily.

That comment brought a smile to the other woman's face. "Shut up!" Huntress exclaimed cheerfully. "You got creamed by a pickpocket?" When the normally waspish reply was replaced by a small moan, she asked, "Are you sure you're okay?"

"Worried?" the other woman bit out as she forced herself erect.

"Curious," the masked Helena replied.

"Right," Dinah muttered as she swung a leg over her motorcycle. As she pulled her helmet on, the blonde-haired woman added spitefully, "I didn't think you cared about anyone!"

Convinced now more than ever that something was definitely wrong with the blonde crime fighter, Helena tagged the other woman's motorcycle with a tracking beacon. Making sure to stay out of sight, the former League member trailed Canary across the city before arriving at the blonde-haired woman's apartment. With the blonde-haired woman showing every sign of turning in for the evening, Huntress began settling in for a long night.

Between experimenting with his costume and the strange dancing instructor from Henchgirl, Harry had nearly forgotten to meet Kara for his first run of monitor duty.

While the two were walking towards the monitor womb, the blonde girl took the opportunity to remind him of the basic procedures in the observatory. As the pair passed another group of League members – where all but one of their party were staring at both Harry and Kara incredulously –, Harry tipped his hat in their direction before catching back up to the distracted Kara.

"What were you doing, Joe?" the blonde girl asked as he returned to her side.

"Oh, just giving the 'tip of the hat'," Harry answered.

She looked back down the way they had walked but saw no one. "To whom, yourself?"

Harry just smiled at her puzzled expression and asked whether monitor duty included a coffee supply.

After quickly scaling a building across the street from Dinah Lance's apartment to continue her surveillance, Huntress contacted her current love interest to see if he had any explanation for Dinah's weird behavior.

"I'm telling you, Q, Canary's totally off her game," the brown-haired woman concluded. "Think she's moonlighting? Maybe she's stepping out on Green Arrow."

"The deeper mystery here is why you even care," the Question responded to the telephoned query. "Isn't this the woman who beat the snot out of you a few months back?"

"She got a lucky shot in!" Helena exploded. At the detective's heavy silence, she admitted, "Okay, five or six lucky shots. Anyway, that's not the point!"

"Ah ha!" the man suddenly exclaimed. Before she could inquire, he added, "Thirty two flavors!"

Rolling her eyes at her boyfriend's suspicious nature, she ignored what was most likely a convoluted scheme on the Question's part, instead commenting, "There's something wrong here, Q. I can feel it."

"I'm the conspiracy theorist, and even I don't see anything," the faceless man disagreed.

The Huntress huffed at the man's dismissal before a mischievous smirk crossed her face. "So... what are you wearing?" she asked breathily

"Blue overcoat, fedora," came the immediate and characteristically dry response.

"You really stink at this," she said bluntly.

"Orange socks?" the Question offered hesitantly.

Huntress shook her head before hanging up the phone. Not a moment too soon, it turned out, as the sound of a motorcycle starting suddenly drew her attention to the ground. Canary apparently decided against resting after all, as she was currently merging back into traffic. The other woman again shadowed the blonde, this time ending up outside of a well-lit arena in Bludhaven. Helena stealthily followed Black Canary through an underground car park and watched as Dinah met up with the costumed Brazilian woman Fire at a secured elevator.

After the two women had ascended to a higher floor, Huntress set to work picking the electronic lock in an attempt to follow the two

League women. Unfortunately, she was quickly interrupted by an elevator full of armed security guards.

Smiling saucily, she sauntered into the small available space and asked, "Going down?"

It was the work of only a few seconds for the skilled martial artist to dispense with the squad of thugs. When the elevator opened once more, the Huntress stepped out into a lush lobby, leaving the now comatose security team inside the stall. Seeing the high-class atmosphere, Helena ducked out of sight and rapidly changed out of her uniform and into a backup dress that she kept upon her person.

Stepping into view, she casually strolled through the milling throng until she came upon what appeared to be some sort of high-class betting arena. Her speculation as to the object of the gambling was soon answered by the appearance of a well-known criminal. Roulette, who was currently wanted in seven states on a wide range of charges, appeared on the giant television screens above the arena and began introducing 'Metabrawl Glammerslam'. Helena felt the uneasy feeling in her stomach growing as the female super villain announced that the next fight was between Fire and Black Canary.

What followed was one of the most savage fights that Huntress had ever witnessed between two supposed allies, with Dinah finally defeating the flamboyant Beatriz. After it was finally over, Helena snuck out of her seat and went below to catch up with the female metahumans and get some answers.

Finally finding Dinah as she attempted to leave the latest incarnation of the Metabrawl, Huntress rushed up and grabbed a hold of the other woman's shoulder. "Geez! What's wrong with you?" Helena demanded once Dinah turned around to face her. "You almost killed Fire back there! Are you under cover? Is Roulette blackmailing you? Talk to me!"

Canary's reply consisted of a flying roundhouse kick that sent Huntress flying into a concrete support pillar. "You've got worse than that coming!" she threatened before spinning around again.

Helena dodged the second attack, however, and rolled a safe distance away from the out-of-control woman. After several brutal

exchanges, Huntress finally got the upper hand. As Canary was staggering from a jab to her throat, the other woman removed her comm. link.

"Better call the League in on-" Huntress started to say before Dinah kicked the electronic device out of her hand. Another couple of blows sent her backing away from the blonde woman and inadvertently breaking the communicator beneath her heel.

"Terrific!" Huntress complained, not noticing that Canary suddenly seemed disoriented with the device's destruction. As the blonde woman approached her unsteadily, Helena unleashed a right cross at Dinah's unprotected chin, sending the other woman to the ground.

"Thanks for saving us the trouble," a male voice called out from behind her. Huntress spun around to find Sonar flanked by another half-dozen security men – all pointing weapons at her.

"We really appreciate it," Sonar added sarcastically.

"You know," Kara spoke up in an offhanded tone, "I don't consider this very stimulating either, but at least I pretend to pay attention to the monitors."

Harry grinned from behind one of his recent literary acquisitions from Avalon. "I'm paying attention," the wizard protested lightly. "Really."

"Sure you are," the girl agreed sarcastically. "Prove it. What's on Monitor 37 right now?"

Without noticeably looking up, Harry replied, "Nothing. Steel hasn't finished repairing that feed yet. With the exception of that small jewel heist in Cairo – which looks like it just got resolved, by the way – there's nothing on the scopes that requires the League's attention."

Kara glanced over at the corresponding video output before staring at her partner in shock. "How did you do that?"

"Magic," Harry fired back through a grin.

"I'll bet," she muttered good-naturedly. "Look on the bright side; it looks like you'll have a peaceful Halloween for once!"

Harry groaned. "Not after you just jinxed it, we won't," he disagreed.

"Oh, you're just being silly," Kara protested. "You can't jinx something just like that... can you?"

Harry glanced at the girl in silence for a moment before flashing screen behind her head caught his attention. "Oh, no?" he demanded. "Then explain that."

Supergirl studied the personnel locator map for a moment before she saw what Harry had found. Apparently, there were five League women all at the same location in Bludhaven. However, what had caught her eye was the strange distortion that their comm. signals were registering.

Before jumping to conclusions – a few of the things John had attempted to teach her had stuck - Kara attempted to contact the women directly in order to discover the source of the problem. As she soon found out, however, none of the women could be reached.

She turned back to Harry to meet an intent gaze. As he raised one eyebrow, she spoke, "I'm sure that it's nothing major. Probably just a glitch-" Black Canary's signal suddenly died "-or not."

Harry stowed his book back in his coat and stood abruptly. "I believe that this warrants further investigation. I'll contact you soon with what I find."

"Hold on just a second, Cowboy," Kara said quickly. "I'm not sitting here if this is part of your typical Halloween freakiness. Just give me a second." Before he could reply, Kara had already activated her communicator and contacted the costumed Wally West. She had no sooner mentioned that she needed him to cover them for a few minutes then a red blur skidded to a halt in front of them."

"So... what's up?" the Flash asked.

Kara shook her head. "I'm not sure. Maybe nothing, but Joe thinks that there's a problem down in Bludhaven. We're gonna go check it out real quick."

"Yeah, that's cool," the Scarlet Speedster replied easily. "I can finish off your shift and still be ready to party tonight with time to spare."

"Thanks again, Wally," Kara mentioned. Harry added his gratitude as well before extending one hand towards the girl. Drawing her closer, he Apparated them both to the approximate location where the signal anomaly originated.

"How was I supposed to know that you'd snapped out of it?" Helena asked her unwilling cellmate. "I mean, I couldn't be sure."

Dinah just looked at her and glared before focusing her attention back on the grimy corner of their prison.

"They've had you up every night working the arena," the Huntress continued unabated. "No wonder you've been fighting like a girl." At the appearance of a second Canary glare, she added, "You know what I mean."

The sound of footsteps in the hallway outside drew the two heroines' attention. Racing to the cell door, the women could easily see both Roulette and a physician enter the cell across the hall from theirs. A closer inspection revealed the patient to be none other than a very battered Fire.

"Don't remember, do you?" Helena asked the blonde woman rhetorically. "You did that to her."

Dinah's eyes widened. "No way!" she denied hoarsely.

"Where do you think you got that burn?" the brunette inquired while gesturing to Canary's singed wrists. As the other woman rubbed the sore appendages, she added consolingly, "It isn't your fault. They must be using some sort of mind control technology."

"Grodd's," Dinah gasped out a hypothesis.

"Well, wherever it comes from, that stuff's a little too effective for my tastes," Helena stated intently.

Black Canary's eyes widened in sudden comprehension. Gaining the other woman's, the blonde woman pointed to her ear.

Misunderstanding the nonverbal cue, Helena replied, "Your earpiece was wrecked in the fight. We can't phone for help."

Dinah shook her head before pointing to her ear more insistently.

"Yeah," Huntress suddenly caught up with the woman's train of thought, "I think you're right. The League comm. links. That must be how Roulette was controlling you."

The sound of a cell door shutting drew their attention back to the medical efforts across the hall. Apparently, the paramedic was finished with Fire as he was accompanying Roulette back towards the exit.

"If she dies, Roulette, I'm taking you down hard. I promise you that!" the Huntress vowed.

Roulette turned around and approached their cell door. Crossing her arms and smirking in a satisfied manner, the villainess asked, "Now, why would I let a valuable commodity die? On the other hand, you two aren't under my control – which means I'm going to have to eliminate you. In the ring, of course – why just snuff you when I can sell tickets and lay odds?"

"You're scum!" Helena rejoined lowly.

"No, no, my dear," Roulette responded jovially, "I'm an entrepreneur. Let's face it; with some A-list heroes to do the jobs, your deaths will net me millions."

With her ultimatum announced, Roulette spun around and slinked her way back to the announcer's booth.

"So... this is Bludhaven?" Harry half-asked, half-stated as the pair reappeared on the outskirts of the city. Looking around at the low-lit and generally unpleasant surroundings, he added, "I take it that tourism isn't very big here?"

"Not really," Kara answered as she scanned the area. "Barb still calls it the 'Little Cesspool'. Of course, it doesn't hold a candle to the 'Big Cesspool' that is Gotham."

"I suppose that you have a point," Harry admitted after reviewing his trip to the crime-ridden city.

"Found 'em!" Kara suddenly exclaimed as her x-ray vision caught sight of the crowded arena. "I can see them in that building over there. I think that it's another incarnation of the Metabrawl – and it looks like they're in trouble!"

"Well, then," Harry uttered grimly, "shall we go crash the party?"

Kara smiled viciously. "Let's!"

Zatanna and Timothy Hunter whiled away the hours waiting for a word on the developments in Calcutta. When night began to fall without any word from Constantine, the twosome was beginning to climb the walls. That was when Zatanna got one of her brilliant ideas and communicated it to her youthful houseguest.

"Where are we going?" the youth in question demanded once more after the woman paid the taxicab driver and stepped back onto the sidewalk.

"Like I said, to a Halloween party," the magician supplied. "I thought that since John was trying to introduce you to some of the most prominent users of magic in the country, I'd take you out and show you a few more of them."

"Right," Tim muttered, "and where are we going again?"

Zatanna smiled. "We're going to a bar called Bewitched. That scuzzball Constantine may not be here, but we'll have a good time, won't we? It's All Hallow's Eve, after all."

"We don't have Halloween in England," the potential wizard mentioned, "not like you do here. That's what I call magic. Ghosts, ghouls, witches and werewolves walking the streets... It's like Constantine said; if you can imagine it, it's here somewhere."

Zatanna smiled in anticipation as she escorted the boy past the door attendant. "C'mon in. I've got a few friends for you to meet."

"An extra added attraction tonight, Ladies and Gentlemen," Roulette announced over the public address system. "Black Canary's had so

much fun that she's come back for more – and she's brought the Huntress with her!"

While the crowd cheered, the criminal woman pressed a button on her remote, which unlocked the shackles binding the two women in the center of the arena.

"But they won't be fighting each other," Roulette announced, earning some negative comments from the crowd. "They'll be fighting together - Huntress and Black Canary against two new contenders! Vixen, the beauty with the beast powers, and the Thanagar Thrasher, Hawkgirl!"

Smiling at the renewed cheering, Roulette spoke again. "Ladies and Gentlemen, place your bets!"

A cloud of concrete and plaster suddenly exploded from the ceiling. "I bet that we can stop your little game in ten seconds flat!" Supergirl announced loudly as she literally 'dropped in' on the illegal fight.

Harry flew down through the opening that Kara's entrance had left before getting his bearings and Apparating onto the central stage. "And I'll wager that the little tart'll be regretting this stunt shortly thereafter," the wizard added. Turning to look at the women present, he found Ollie's girlfriend Dinah and who he believed to be the Huntress back-to-back as they prepared to fight Mari and Shayera. Given his many experiences with the Death Eaters' tactics, Harry quickly realized that the latter two women were not acting on their own volition and promptly body-bound both of them.

"Good evening, Canary, Huntress. Would one of you mind telling us what's happened thus far?" Harry asked as Kara battered the arena's force field down and landed at Harry's side.

"You're that Mr. Black guy that Green Arrow was going on about?" Dinah asked once she had recovered from the man's sudden appearance and quick restraint of the two mind-controlled Leaguers.

Harry dipped his head. "Guilty as charged," he admitted. "Now, do either of you know who is responsible for their current condition?" he asked while nodding his head in the other two women's directions.

"Roulette," Huntress growled in an eerie imitation of Batman. "She's somehow using the League comm. links to take control of people's minds. Canary here snapped out of it once I broke her communicator."

Harry nodded his head in gratitude. "Righto," he replied before Summoning the electronic articles from both Vixen's and Hawkgirl's possession. With the nefarious devices in hand, the wizard took great satisfaction in using his enhanced strength to grind the gadgets into powder with one clenched fist. The effect was instantaneous; as soon as he destroyed the communication devices, both of the affected women's eyes blinked in confusion. Seeing this, Harry dispelled his two petrifications.

Eyes wide, Shayera muttered, "I don't think I want to know."

"We're all in a cage match, fighting to the death," Dinah informed the redhead.

"See?" the Thanagarian immediately replied.

The Huntress walked to the edge of the platform and looked up at Roulette and Sonar in the control booth. "That all you got?" she demanded of the villainess.

"Oh, no," Roulette replied smarmily as the arena's central elevator was activated. "I've saved the very best for last!" Exactly what the 'very best' consisted of became evident a few moments later as the muscled form of the Amazon princess rose to the platform.

"Yes, that's really Wonder Woman, ladies and gentlemen," Roulette confirmed for the crowd. "It is on!"

Harry just sighed as he saw the same oddness in Diana's eyes as with Shayera and Mari only moments earlier. As Diana came charging towards the group, Harry stepped to the side and grabbed the Amazon's leading arm by its silver bracelet. Before the woman could recover, the wizard gave the appendage a twist to pivot the slightly shorter Leaguer's back to his front. Between the lessons with Thena and Artie, the unexpected side effect of Doctor Schlock's memory implant machine, and a few brief sessions with Wildcat on the Watchtower, Harry did not even think before grabbing the

metahuman's other arm in a similar grip and forcing the brunette facedown on the floor with her arms held tightly behind her back.

"Let me go, you insignificant little man!" the not-Diana demanded arrogantly.

"Since I know that you're not quite yourself at the moment, I'm going to let that slide," Harry offered from his kneeling position on the woman's back. Switching both her forearms to a one-handed grip, Harry reached up to her ear with his other hand and retrieved her comm. link. A miniscule exertion of effort later found a very confused Diana in a very uncomfortable position.

"I hope you have a good explanation for this," a not-much-more-cordial Amazon grunted from underneath him.

"Oh, right. Sorry about that," Harry responded as he quickly hopped off her back and offered the woman a hand. "To make a long story short, most of you ladies were under an electronic possession and were fighting each other in a no-holds-barred cage fight. Don't worry, though; I think that we have disrupted those plans nicely."

Another intercom address from the top box interrupted his explanation. "Who – or what – the devil are you?" the brunette criminal demanded.

Harry glared up at the so-called 'Roulette' and another figure in the control booth. His first impulse was to immediately Apparate up there and dispatch the ones responsible in as expedient a manner as possible. Fortunately, for the two people in question, Harry decided that ascertaining Fire's fate was more important.

"I'm something of a guardian angel," the wizard supplied via a Sonorous Charm, "and I am known these days as Mr. Black. Now, be a dear and stay put!" Harry ordered the pair of villains. "I'll be right with you." Turning back to the League women, he asked, "Now, where is Fire?"

"About sixty feet beneath us," Dinah Lance supplied as she studied the mysterious figure that had so timely resolved a rather sticky situation. Apparently, this relatively ordinary-seeming figure was countless millennia old – if the rumors she heard were correct - and Ollie stressed that he was to be treated with the utmost courtesy.

Even if the wild tales about the man's... occupation were in error, it did not pay to be deliberately rude to someone who could maneuver Wonder Woman as if she was a small child. "I believe that she's hurt, though I'm not sure how seriously," the blonde woman concluded.

Harry nodded sharply and prepared to phase through the floor in pursuit of the Brazilian woman. Before he went intangible, however, he heard a loud crack and felt something lightly collide with the back of his head before bouncing to a landing. Turning around slowly, the wizard caught sight of a team of suited men – apparently some sort of security detail – armed with heavy caliber weaponry. The man in the lead was staring at Harry in shock, the still-smoking barrel of some sort of assault rifle still leveled at his position.

Harry blinked as he realized what must have happened, though at a loss as to how he survived a direct hit to his supposedly 'unprotected' head. 'Something to ask Henchgirl about later,' he vowed resignedly before fixing the group with a glare.

Stretching out one hand, Harry Summoned his would-be murderer and held the man aloft via a one-handed chokehold. Very purposely, the wizard reached out with the other hand and removed the man's sunglasses so that they were eye-to-eye. "Don't. Do. That. Again," he growled. As the man stuttered out some sort of apology, Harry heaved the figure back through the broken force field pane, bowling over several of the shooter's friends in the process.

The few who were missed by Harry's first foray into ten-pin bowling chambered their weapons and took aim at the Leaguers. Glaring at the nuisances who seemed content to murder his friends, the mage coldly announced, "When all your bullets are gone, you'd better pray that I'm not standing – because you'll all be dead before you reload."

The atrium suddenly grew still before the sound of many automatic weapons striking the floor echoed over everyone present.

Harry smiled grimly. "Excellent choice," he intoned before sending a few quick charms to render the whole assortment of hired thugs both unconscious and bound in unbreakable ropes. Turning his attention to the gawking spectators, Harry cast another Sonorous Charm and calmly stated, "I'll forget any faces I've seen tonight if you all disappear in the next ten seconds."

The crowd seemed frozen in their seats, still mute.

Harry made a show of looking around before drawing himself up and announcing, "One."

Oddly enough, the high-class and otherwise respectable customers suddenly remembered all sorts of engagements requiring their immediate presences elsewhere.

Nodding to himself at a job well done, Harry gave the sunglasses an appraising once-over before donning the article and turned to the other League members. "I'll go check on Fire. If you lot are up to it, see if we missed anyone." Before anyone else could comment, the wizard phased through the floor.

"Just exactly who is that guy?" Huntress demanded. "Some sort of magical Special Forces?"

Kara smiled impishly as she recalled the man's earlier reply to a similar question. "He's just a guy on vacation!" the Argosian chirped brightly.

"Riiiiiight," the masked ebony-haired woman threw back sarcastically, "and when he's not on vacation?"

"Put it this way," Shayera proposed. "You know how most perfectly ordinary guys get a taste of power and suddenly think they're gods?"

There was a round of somewhat jaded agreements among the more experienced females there.

The winged woman continued, "Apparently, the grass really is always greener on the other side, because he happens to actually be a god who wants everyone to think that he's just an ordinary guy."

Kara looked over at the Thanagarian askance. "You do know that he hates comments like that, right?" she asked the older woman while x-raying the area. "He doesn't consider himself all that different from the norm, save a few small... discrepancies, and he really dislikes being put on a pedestal."

Shayera smiled derisively. "Look, sweetheart, I've seen beings with a tenth of his power pass themselves off as gods – successfully. Now, don't get me wrong," she interjected as the Argosian looked as if to interrupt, "Mr. Black's a great guy - and I'm really, really glad that he's on our side - but he's about as abnormal as you can get."

Supergirl rolled her eyes. "Oh, he's not that bad!" she protested. "Sure, he's got a quirk or two-"

The Thanagarian snorted. "Like the 'inability to die' quirk?" she inquired humorously.

"Or the reality warping powers," Diana added as she checked on the bound security thugs. "Of course, the control over space and time is rather impressive as well."

"Yeah, like those," Kara confirmed before a shrill whine interrupted their conversation. An instant later, even those individuals without advanced hearing could detect a loud crash coming from beneath them.

"What was that?" Canary demanded.

Kara looked around for a moment before replying anxiously, "The elevator leading to the top box just came loose and fell!"

"Where are Roulette and Sonar?" Huntress demanded of the only person with X-ray vision, since neither of the two criminals were visible from her vantage point.

Kara followed the shaft down until she found the devastation at the bottom. Wordlessly, Kara winced.

"Did they make it?" Mari asked carefully.

The blonde Argosian blinked at the grisly sight before slowly shaking her head.

Diana and Shayera exchanged a glance over the extremely convenient 'accident' that occurred almost immediately after a certain male mystic slipped out of sight.

"Umm... I just realized something," Timothy Hunter admitted to his female escort as he looked over the crowd of vampires, werewolves, zombies, and other assorted creatures. "The people here... none of them are wearing masks, are they?"

"No," Zatanna answered simply.

Timothy looked amazed. "It's like there's a whole other world - that I never knew existed – side by side with the old one."

"Yes," the Enchantress agreed, "and once you enter it, you can never leave."

"Never?" the young wizard-potential echoed worryingly.

Noticing his stress, Zatanna consoled, "You haven't entered it yet, Tim. You're a guest."

A loud pop gathered the milling throng's attention to the stage along one wall where Tannarak, the black magician Tim had met earlier with hopes for immortality, waited to speak. Once the gathered people and creatures settled down, the club's owner immediately began addressing the crowd.

"Ladies, gentlemen, other entities, I have an announcement," the necromancy-obsessed sorcerer professed. "It seems there's a very special young lad in our audience tonight. Some of you may have heard about him on the grapevine. Others of you might have heard about the current fun and games in Calcutta."

Zatanna's eyes grew wide. "Oh, shoot! I'm sorry, Tim," the witch pleaded. "I should never have brought you here."

As if the League women's suspicions summoned him, Harry rose through the floor with a slowly rousing Fire in his arms. "She'll be alright," Harry informed the women. "She's just a little out of it right now." The wizard's summary was proven valid when the pyrotechnic metahuman from Brazil shortly came alight, washing Harry in harmless green flames.

'Odd,' Harry thought to himself. 'I don't even feel warm, and her report said that she could melt steel! What in the world is going on?'

Dinah Lance raised one blonde eyebrow and asked, "So, you're fireproof, too?" She blinked before adding, "No pun intended."

"It would seem so," Harry answered honestly. "Did you all capture the rest of our friends?"

Shayera huffed irritably. "You already knocked out the hired help; all we had left to do was destroy the mind control stuff. Not to mention that the two morons responsible for this mess just took a six-story plunge in an express elevator. No survivors."

"Ah, yes, that would probably do it, wouldn't it?" Harry responded, nodding at the explanation for the clamor that he had heard while rescuing Fire from her prison cell. He felt distinctly unsympathetic at the ill fates befalling the two criminals who had brainwashed his friends in order to have them kill themselves for money.

The wizard shrugged. "Well, I did tell them to stay put. A very tragic end to two very disappointing examples of humanity," the mage summarized in a detached tone. A heartbeat later, he added brightly, "Well... best not wallow in our grief."

The Huntress looked at Harry askance. "So," the Catholic woman hesitated, "Guardian Angel, huh?"

Harry looked at the masked woman for a moment before nodding. "Yeah, that's part of my job – so to speak." As Beatriz began finally coming around, Harry helped her back to her feet.

Helena looked thoughtful. "I was expecting... I don't know..."

The wizard grinned at the woman's literal interpretation of his comment. "Halo?" he offered amusedly.

"Yes," she agreed immediately.

Definitely entertained now, he again queried, "Inner light?"

The Huntress nodded again.

Harry leaned towards her with an even wider grin and stage-whispered, "I'm not that kind of Angel."

The masked woman matched his smile. "That was a nice takedown on the princess, by the way," the Huntress congratulated. "I didn't quite recognize the style. Kung fu?"

"Thank you," Harry accepted easily, "and yes, that was one of the disciplines that fell out of use a few centuries ago."

"So you know different variants of the martial arts, then?" she asked. At his nod, Helena continued, "Do you mind if I ask how many?"

Harry shook his head slightly. "No, not at all," he confirmed before staring at her smilingly.

The Huntress rolled her eyes at the exact same verbal trap that the Question was always springing on her. "How many different martial arts styles do you know?" she finally rephrased.

The wizard thought back to the memory dump he received from Doctor Schlock. "All of them, I believe," Harry finally answered after some thought.

Before he could comment further, his scar – which had been mercifully inactive since his rather direct disposal of Voldemort – gave a twinge, and he felt a slight pulling sensation to some far-off location to the west. Having an unpleasant recollection of a certain speech from a certain watery tart involving a certain rather innocuous phrase 'Champion of the Light', Harry had a sudden desire to recite every swear word that he had ever heard.

Focusing on the location he sensed with some urgency, Harry addressed his female colleagues again. "Sorry to cut this short, Ladies, but there's a problem that requires my attention. Kara, use your comm. link to request transport for everyone back to the Watchtower and I'll look you up once things are settled."

"I don't think so, Mister," the blonde girl vetoed immediately. "If I let you disappear now, you'll just get distracted and then blow off our party later – and you are taking me dancing." The Argosian had the audacity to smile at him! "Besides, you might need my help."

At hearing similar comments from several other heroines present, Harry dug in his pocket for a Black Hole, all the while muttering something sounding suspiciously like a rant about 'bloody stubborn

women' under his breath. "Fine," he replied to the blonde powerhouse sharply, "but if you get your pretty little bum cursed off by some dark wizard, don't come crying to me!"

Kara smiled at him mischievously. "You think I have a cute butt?"

The wizard slowly raked one hand down his face before stalking through the now-opened portal. He noticeably withheld comment.

"Another point to me!" the young superheroine exclaimed happily before following the mage through the inky portal.

"As you know," Tannarak said intently, "there is a price on his head – which need not be attached to his body."

"This boy is under my protection," Zatanna announced as she shielded Tim from Tannarak with her own body. "Anyone who wishes to hurt him must first reckon with me."

The black magician smiled wickedly. "My dear Zatanna, face facts. There's one of you, and over a hundred of us. The child is history."

"Is that so?" Harry asked coldly as he exited the Black hole in the wall behind the other man. The wizard caught the gist of the last exchange and thus had a good idea of what was about to befall his friend Zatanna.

Once the fate of an innocent child became involved, no one who knew either Harry or Mr. Black should have been surprised that the goateed magician immediately met the scarlet glare of a Reductor curse directed to center mass.

Harry looked down at white-clad form in derision. Even with the giant bleeding hole in the man's torso, the recumbent figure was somehow still alive – if the pain-filled moans and twitching were anything to go by, anyway. "Let me guess," Harry addressed the magically-supported almost-corpse, "you did something very naughty and created a Horcrux with part of your soul, didn't you?"

Harry shook his head sadly, as the League women exited the Black Hole behind him. "Why you people trade away your souls for a little thing like a longer lifespan, I will never understand. Now, I wonder if

you were foolish enough to leave the trinket lying around here somewhere."

The wizard engaged his mage sight and followed an inky black line leading away from the fallen dark sorcerer. The magical cord terminated behind what appeared to be a warded safe hidden behind the man's portrait over the bar.

"How clichéd," Harry grumbled as he fired a Blasting Hex at the portrait, eliminated the safe's concealment. Summoning the receptacle to the stage, Harry phased his arm through the warded container and retrieved a small Egyptian figurine. Confirming that it was indeed a Horcrux, Harry finished, "Not to mention pointless and ironic. All of the pain and suffering you inflicted on others to escape Death's grasp, and now you want to die to escape the pain and suffering. Ah well, give the Devil my regards when you see him in Hell."

The wizard flung the porcelain statue down on the stage, where it shattered and released the spell anchoring Tannarak to the world of life. As the unlamented sorcerer and alchemist finally – and perhaps, mercifully – died, Harry looked up at the mob who threatened Zatanna and her charge only a few moments prior to his... altercation.

Casting another Sonorous Charm, Harry addressed his dumbstruck audience. "Now that I have your attention," the mage calmly stated, "allow me to introduce myself. I am known these days as Mr. Black." He smiled tightly at the nervous whisperings that flew through the crowd at his announcement. "Yes, that Mr. Black, and I'm rather annoyed that you lot are threatening my friend Zatanna and her young companion."

Harry smiled more openly when the throngs of dark creatures immediately gave the addressed duo a wide berth. "Now," he continued, "we can settle this one of two ways. You lot either clear out of here this instant and tell all your little friends that the young man is now under my protection, or... you can all stick around and I will answer any challenges you might have offered to Lady Zatanna."

Bedlam ensued as the gathered dark creatures and magicians fought each other to flee the imposing figure the fastest. Once the

cacophony had left, Harry casually strolled past Tannarak's remains and approached the magic duo.

"Hey, Zee," Harry greeted, "how's it going?"

Zatanna the Enchantress smiled. "Hello, Joe. Not to be ungrateful or anything, but I could have taken them."

Harry waved off her comment. "Hey, what are friends for? Besides, I was in the neighborhood – relatively speaking." Turning to the young boy at her side, Harry extended one hand. "Hello, I don't think we've been properly introduced. You may call me Joe Black."

"Tim Hunter," the potential wizard responded while shaking the proffered hand. "How did you know to show up right then?"

Harry smiled while rubbing his temple, whose painful throbs were now thankfully receding. "Magic?" the elder wizard presented with a shrug. Looking around, he mentioned, "I'm just going to go make sure that your playmates aren't planning any more mischief this evening. I'll be back in a moment." He mentally changed his coat to the more concealing black cloak and, before anyone – especially Kara – could intervene, he Apparated onto the roof of the club and checked the surrounding areas for signs of trouble.

Back downstairs, Tim turned to Zatanna and said, "I've seen him before, back when one of the trench coat guys showed me the beginning of time. After we watched as Lucifer and the other Fallen Angels were kicked out of Heaven, there were these Archangels as big as worlds. I think I met Raguel, the Angel of Vengeance, at Corrigan's Detective Agency with Constantine earlier today. That Mr. Black guy though... with that cloak, he looks a whole lot like Gabriel, the Lord of the Cherubim and the Seraphim."

"Really?" Huntress voiced interestedly.

Timothy nodded. "Yeah," he confirmed excitedly. "Before today, I used to think that all of that were just stories. Now, I wonder just how many other mythological figures are out there."

Zatanna felt compelled to add, "Well, Joe mentioned that his brother Xander was stationed on the Hellmouth, a chaotic portal to the different Hell dimensions."

"Xander?" Black Canary questioned. "You mean, as in 'Alexander', the Defender of Mankind?"

"Well," the masked Helena huffed, "I guess that explains where Michael, the Archangel who is set over Chaos, has been hiding the last few centuries."

While the women were discussing matters downstairs, Harry patrolled the area surrounding Bewitched. The wizard finally decided that the club's denizens had taken his warning seriously, for there was not a single dark creature in sight. In fact, the only trouble he spotted was where the departing beings had knocked over an old-fashioned lamppost, starting a small fire amongst the litter. Fortunately, however, the smoke made the fire appear much larger than it truly was, and the wizard was able to quickly put it out and repair the damage.

Nodding to himself at a job well done, the wizard strolled back inside the club. "All clear," Harry announced. "I had to clean up a little mess that a couple of our 'friends' started, but everything's fine now."

"You ran off again," Kara greeted his return before noticeably sniffing the air, "and you smell like smoke. What did you get into now?"

Harry looked over himself and shrugged before charming his cloak clean again. "Oh, just a little fire," he informed the others, "nothing that should concern any of you. I caught the problem before it became really serious." He inspected the empty club again. "You know, this is a very nice bar. I wonder what's going to happen to it."

"Well, since the last proprietor was just... removed, I guess the bank will auction it off to clear Tannarak's debt," Zatanna supplied with an uneasy glance at the stage's grisly spectacle.

"Hmm," the wizard acknowledged absently, "how interesting." Noticeably changing the subject, Harry turned to Timothy and asked, "So, Tim, how did you end up in Zee's company?"

The younger wizard looked at Harry suspiciously for a moment before replying. "Well, Constantine – that's John Constantine – was showing me the magical world. You see, I'm not sure if I really want to become involved in this... lifestyle."

"A sensible attitude," Harry nodded as he waved the group to a surviving table. Remembering one of Dumbledore's cryptic little comments, Harry noted, "Magic is a lot like the truth; it is a beautiful and terrible thing, and should therefore be treated with great caution."

Timothy looked thoughtful for a moment. "That's what I've been hearing; in fact, several people I've met have tried to warn me off learning magic altogether." The boy paused again before asking, "Can I ask you a question?"

Harry grinned slightly. "You just did, but you can ask another," he responded humorously.

The wizard-to-be rolled his eyes at the oft-heard joke before voicing his inquiry. "If you could go back in time and stop yourself from learning magic, would you?"

The older wizard smiled ruefully. "It wasn't exactly my choice, Tim. I was... elected... to counter a great evil. You see, he was one of us at one point – one of the best and brightest - before his greed and massive ego twisted him into a vile creature driven solely by hatred." Harry blinked as he recalled all the senseless violence that Voldemort had unleashed. "The others tried to stop the monster, but it had grown too powerful and seduced too many others into fighting against their former friends. As you can no doubt guess, war broke out and a whole lot of damage was accrued."

Harry shrugged self-consciously. "Anyway, our people were getting desperate to find some way of defeating the insurrectionists, as everything they had tried up to that point had ended in nothing but more loss of life. So, God, or the Creator, or the Powers That Be – insert your favorite euphemism here – created a weapon with even more power than this fallen one's abilities, gave it a rather annoying lack of self-preservation instincts, then dumped me in the middle of the war. Long story short – my friends and I eliminated his support,

the two of us fought, and I dispatched his excuse for a soul straight to Hell."

He mentally shook off the old memories. "But I suppose that that doesn't really answer your question. If I was born like you, an ordinary human wizard with no more responsibility or destiny than what I set for myself, would I still become involved with the affairs of the magical world?" Harry asked himself. Pausing for a few moments to collect his thoughts, the wizard continued, "Yes, I suppose that I would."

"But why?" Tim Hunter demanded. "If this magical world is so full of evil sorcerers who want to be immortal, and zombies, and werewolves, and such... why would any sane person want such a life?"

Harry smiled slightly. "Because, Tim, even though everything you said is true, those evil beings you mentioned can only truly win if the good people of the world do nothing. Personally, I've tried to withdraw from the fight, to let the chips fall where they may and just live my own life..." He snorted. "It never works. There's always a threatening apocalypse, or an upcoming demon invasion, or any one of a million different catastrophes just waiting to befall this happily oblivious world that always draws me right back into the fight."

"Well," the boy said after a few seconds, "I can still walk away from this mess. I haven't agreed to anything yet."

The dimension-hopping mage looked at the younger magician with an upraised eyebrow. "Can you now?" he asked amusedly. "Any human can work magic to an extent – all it takes is some herbs or incantations to attract the attention of a being of power and make a request of it. Those people can walk away from magic, albeit with a great degree of will. You, however, were born a wizard. You, just like Zee or me, can manipulate the world with your power alone. It is a part of you, and it always will be."

Tim looked nervous. "But I don't have to get involved. I can ignore this hidden world, right?"

Harry looked at him understandingly. "I suppose that it's possible," Harry allowed. "You could run off somewhere, ward your hiding place, and pretend that all is right in the world... but would you be

happy there, knowing that there are people suffering needlessly due to your inaction?"

"But I'm not a hero!" Tim blurted. "Maybe you can just stroll casually into the lions' den and chase off a roomful of monsters without lifting a finger, but I sure can't!"

Harry snorted. "I have been called many things but, I assure you, 'hero' is rarely among them. If being a hero is your goal, then you should talk with my lovely associates here. They can tell you all about being a bright, shining beacon to the masses, or how to walk the dark paths and still come back into the light."

The elder wizard shook his head resignedly. "No, Tim, your prototypical hero is ultimately little more than a biological shield. He or she will put their prey away and then plan for their inevitable escape and inevitable return to the fight. I, on the other hand, simply do what must be done – what most are incapable of doing. Think of me as a sword to their shield." He shrugged slightly. "Death is my gift and my curse, but if my actions allow just one other to retain their innocence, then I consider my efforts worthwhile."

Tim looked at the other wizard warily. "So... you just... you know-" he dragged one finger across his throat "-anybody who breaks the law?"

Harry smiled at the teenager's misunderstanding. "Not exactly," Harry clarified, "I'm all for giving a measured response, which is why I confine my... predations to those whose continued existence would endanger humanity as a whole. It is those individuals, Tim, who I have declared war on, and they have come to know me well. For example, a werewolf intentionally attacks a village looking for a buffet? I wipe out its entire den. A vampire or demon feeds from an innocent? I burn down the entire coven. Some wizard or witch sacrifices guiltless children in some dark ritual? I remove their organs in alphabetical order while they remain conscious. My job is to make the consequences of their depravations so horrific that it becomes unthinkable to even commit them."

"Err... you mean, like with Tannarak?" Tim asked while gesturing at the fallen sorcerer.

Harry nodded. "Precisely. That little statue that I smashed was what is called a Horcrux. Simply put, when a dark wizard or witch murders an innocent, they can perform a spell to cut off a piece of their soul and embed it in an object. Then, as long as the Horcrux remains intact, the spell caster cannot die."

Tim nodded in comprehension. "But if it gets smashed..."

"Then they're as mortal as any human, except now they have a fragmented soul," Harry concluded.

"Anyway," the older wizard continued as he leaned back in his chair, "getting back to my point, your new mates weren't running from a hero; they were fleeing a bigger, nastier monster. The only real difference between me and them is that their prey of choice is the innocent, and I hunt everything that isn't." He snapped his fingers suddenly as he remembered his earlier declaration. "Which reminds me..." he muttered.

The wizard dug through his coat pocket until his questing hand found its objective. Withdrawing another Zippo and a bag of owl treats, Harry handed the items to the young wizard. "The world's a very large and confusing place. If you should need me or just have a question – be it magic-related or not - just spin the wheel and call my name."

"Thanks," Tim responded unsurely after a few seconds, "but what's in the bag?"

"Owl treats," Harry supplied. Taking another sniff to confirm that the particular avian smell was coming most strongly from the young wizard, he continued, "The owl is yours, isn't it?"

The boy blinked repeatedly. "Yeah, Yo-yo's mine," Tim replied, "but I'm not sure that I'll live long enough to get these to him, what with all the people who want to kill me."

Harry's smile turned several shades darker as he recalled how panic-stricken the fleeing crowd had been. "Oh, I wouldn't worry about that lot too much," the immortal mage commented.

Before the boy could question Harry further, they were interrupted by the arrival of a blonde-haired man in a brown trench coat. In one

hand, he held a lit cigarette while the other was stroking the feathers of a white owl roosting on his shoulder.

"Whoa," the new arrival announced, "this place looks dead."

"John!" Zatanna greeted, seconded by Timothy's, "Yo-yo!"

The bird took flight and headed directly to the young man's shoulder, where it began nudging the bag of owl treats with its beak. As Tim fed his avian acquaintance, the female magician attempted to interrogate Constantine – to no avail.

"So, who ventilated the stiff?" the man asked as he pulled up another chair to the League's table. "Huh," John added as he looked around, "nice place."

Harry raised a hand briefly. "That would be me. The 'stiff' was Tannarak, who owned this place, as it so happens. Anyway, he was threatening to shorten Tim by a head and rough up Zatanna. I took offense."

Constantine quirked a slight smile. "I like your style. The name's John Constantine," the blonde man mentioned as he extended a hand.

"Joe Black," Harry replied as they briefly shook hands.

"Ah, so you're the indestructible Mr. Black that has the underworld in an uproar," the older occult specialist noted. "You've made a real nice impression in certain circles. I'm almost jealous."

Harry grinned slightly but withheld comment.

"So, what was the big emergency?" Zatanna demanded, interrupting the two men's exchange. "Was it as bad as you thought?"

"It was shaping up to be worse," the British mystic expert admitted. "The cult of Kali was up to their old tricks again. This time they were planning some sort of ritual involving young Tim here and had three ninja death squads guarding their headquarters. Not only that, but the Brotherhood of the Cold Flame was partnered up with them and brought a thousand elephants in as some sort of big smelly cavalry."

Zatanna looked incredulous. "What happened?" she demanded.

"Well, my acquaintances-in-big-coats and I were just fixing to get our arses handed to us when, out of the blue, an untended petrol lorry's brakes gave out, and it started rolling down this big hill right next to us," John confided.

"What's your point?" she demanded at the apparent non sequitur. "Mechanical failure isn't all that remarkable."

"Yeah, well, having the truck steer itself mysteriously around a dozen obstacles – any of which should have stopped it - and driving itself into the heart of the bad guys was a little new to me," John answered sarcastically.

"What?" Tim asked disbelievingly as several of the women at the table began looking askance at an oblivious Harry.

"Yeah," Constantine chuckled, "the Flame boys went up like dry grass before the rig smashed into the Cult's headquarters, blowing the whole thing straight to Hell. Then, those little star disks they have on those sprinkler heads all come flying out of the giant fireball and catch every single one of those pajama-wearing poofs right in the throat. And if that wasn't enough," he continued, "the ruckus spooks the elephants into a stampede, which flattens anyone who had managed to survive up to that point. Since there wasn't anyone left to fight, we picked through the Cult's headquarters until the flying feather duster over there brought me a note saying that I needed to come here. That's pretty much it," he concluded.

"Yo-yo brought you a letter?" Tim demanded incredulously. "Why? How?"

Harry looked over askance at the young man. "He's an owl, you're a wizard. What's so difficult to understand?"

"Well, for one thing, he's a bloody owl!" Tim protested.

The older wizard just smiled in remembrance of his first visit to Diagon Alley. "Oh, right. I forgot that you're new to the hidden world. It's a long story, but the short version is that wizards were sending post via owls when the rest of humanity was still living in mud huts and caves."

By now, Harry was under observation by a half-dozen females. Still unaware of their scrutiny, he turned to the blond man and offered, "Well, it sounds like someone up there likes you," while pointing up towards the heavens.

Constantine snorted. "Angels have always given me the creeps. Besides, most of 'em seem content to stay up in their little paradise and let us clean up their messes for them - and when the choir invisible does deign to get off their feathered arses and come down here, they start screwing around with humanity just as badly as the demons. Actually, I think I might prefer the demons. At least you know where you stand with them. They just want your soul. With the Powers-that-screw-you, there's no telling what they after at the moment."

Harry nodded sadly. "I've heard the rumors. It's... disheartening to hear that such a well-intentioned group could go so far astray."

"Yeah, well, if a few demons can play nice, why not have a few interfering arses amongst the angels, eh?" Constantine mused sarcastically.

Harry nodded in reluctant agreement. "I suppose that you have a point," he admitted, "but you have to admit that they can't all be bad."

"Well, if they're so great, then why don't they try something new and stop their little messes before it all hits the fan?" the other man demanded as he took another draw off his cigarette.

"You do know that those things will kill you, right?" Harry asked as he gestured to the lit tobacco.

Constantine smirked knowingly. "I'll take my chances," he finally uttered.

The wizard shrugged. "As you wish. Anyway, to answer your question, maybe they occasionally missed a spot of trouble – they aren't exactly omniscient, after all. Not to mention the Balance."

The older man huffed indignantly as Tim repeated questionably, "The Balance? What's that?"

"See, kid, Angels and Demons can't cross over into our plane," Constantine explained, "or, at least, they can't except under certain special circumstances. Sometimes they cheat, and sometimes people somehow invite them to Earth, but for the most part, we get what I call half-breeds. That is, someone with either the demon's touch or a part-angel. They're the influence peddlers, whispering encouragement or madness in our ears. They call it the balance. I call it hypocritical bullshit."

Harry smiled again at the cynical man's colorful summary. "Well, I suppose that that's one way of looking at it," he admitted. "And you could be right about the whole Calcutta thing. Maybe just some strange coincidence worked things out in your favor."

"That's what I've been sayin'," John broke in bluntly.

The other man nodded in acknowledgement. "Or maybe," he continued, "someone who didn't get caught up in the political mess upstairs slipped in a little help 'under the radar', as it were."

"While that's all very warm and fuzzy, I'm not sold on the whole 'Heavenly intervention story' – though the other coats seemed to go with it," John contested. "After all, what kind of Angel blows up a building, sets a bunch of people on fire, slits the throat of several more, and tramples the rest into the ground?"

Harry shrugged at the series of strange events. At least there was no way that anyone could blame the weird high jinks on him this time – he was nowhere near India. "Maybe he had a bad day and was venting?" the wizard offered. "None of us are perfect, you know."

"Right," the other man said in a disbelieving tone. "At the least, I don't think that anyone's got the guts to come after Tim again. Literally, in several cases."

"Glad to hear it," Harry responded as his attention wandered around the club's interior again. "You know," he mused, "I may contact the bank in the morning. I own several businesses, including a string of casinos, but I've never had my own club before."

"Are you serious?" Kara blurted, thankful that the conversation had turned to a topic in which she could contribute.

Harry turned to the slim blonde-haired woman and smiled brightly. "Actually, I'm Joe, but I think that he'd approve," the wizard quipped. "I even have the perfect name. How does 'The Leaky Cauldron' strike you? Too nostalgic?"

The Argosian blinked. "No, the name's fine. Why do you want to own a nightclub again?"

"It'll be fun," he replied with a shrug. "Besides, you and Tea both mentioned the possibility of getting part-time jobs for the experience, but couldn't because of how difficult it would be to get away in the event of a League emergency. That wouldn't be an issue here," Harry finished. "Besides, the less places for that rabble that was here earlier to haunt, the better."

"I suppose that you have a point," Kara offered after a moment of thought. "Getting paid to sing, dance, and serve drinks definitely beats pitching hay and milking cows at any rate."

"That's the spirit!" Harry finalized as he looked at his watch. "Well, we have a prior engagement soon and really must be going. It was a pleasure meeting you both, Tim, John. Zee, do you want a lift back to your place?"

The top hat-wearing woman shook her head. "No thanks. I can Apparate back to my house. Which reminds me... would you mind coming over sometime and checking the wards on the place? I liked some of those you mentioned when we were on Avalon, but I'm not quite sure if I got them all anchored correctly."

"Certainly," Harry agreed. "If you're coming to the party later tonight, we can work out a suitable time then."

"I'll be there," the Enchantress confirmed.

The others made their own farewells before the group returned through the portal.

As Mr. Black and the other League women left, Zatanna took the opportunity to hit John on the back of the head.

Hard.

"OW! What the frack was that for?" came the incensed response from Constantine.

"Do you even know who you were talking to?" asked Zatanna.

"Yeah. Some show off, powered up, poof with a lot of money," John sarcastically replied. "Talks big, but I doubt that he could deliver in a pinch."

Zatanna and Tim looked at him with disbelieving expressions, albeit extremely different reasons.

Personally, Tim was still coping with having just met a being of power that Constantine had neither met nor – even more surprisingly - upset in some way, and everybody else in the world seemed to know. Unfortunately, his mentor on this section of his journey had yet to come across as someone who could actually advise him in any truly important matters... Perhaps Mr. Black would be willing to take him on as an apprentice. At the very least, security would not be a problem.

Zatanna, on the other hand, could not believe how out-of-date her old friend had become. Sure, he still seemed able to irritate the most powerful beings in existence - that was a given. That he did not seem to know the most pertinent details regarding Mr. Black - now that was strange.

"Let me ask you a question," the Enchantress voiced. "You saw how he left here, right?"

"Yeah, a portal. Anybody with a bit of hokery pokery could do that. Ain't exactly impressive," John replied with a grin.

Zatanna raised an eyebrow. "Please tell me that someone's told you about the war in Heaven?"

Constantine dipped his head as ground out the cigarette on the table. "Yeah. The Angels lazed around until they let their troubles spill out onto the mortal world before trying to solve the problem. Bloody gits."

Tim's jaw dropped open slightly. That was nowhere near the actual truth that he himself witnessed. 'Yes,' he finally decided, 'having that magical Zippo from Mr. Black seemed like a very good thing at the moment.'

"Um... John," the young wizard hesitated, before proceeding, "in the future, could you do us all a huge favor and not upset the Archangel who can send entire armies running in fear?"

The middle-aged occult specialist cocked his head sideways. "What are you on about, Tim?" asked a confused John Constantine.

After extending a tentative invitation for the Huntress to join them in the celebration later, the two Gotham-based femme fatales headed towards the parking garage for their bikes.

After finding out that the teleporters were out of order again, Harry opened another Black Hole to the Watchtower. The remainder of the group stepped through again and exited into an empty hallway leading towards the monitor womb.

"Well, that was fun," Shayera grumbled as she rubbed her still-sore neck, "but now we don't have enough time to get ready and make it to the party on time."

"You have almost an hour," Harry protest after he checked his watch.

The winged woman looked over at the blonde Argosian, who was currently shaking her head. "You haven't covered this one in basic training yet, I take it?"

The girl shrugged. "I'm still breaking him in," Kara explained before focusing her attention on the closest male present. "Joe," she stated patiently, "most of us can't change our entire appearance with a mere thought. We actually have to change clothes the old-fashioned way, do our hair - that sort of thing."

"I still don't see your point," Harry replied honestly.

"My point is that those things take time," the young woman explained, "which you could give us very easily."

Catching where she was going, Harry stuffed his hands in his pockets. "Oh, no," he refused, "I am not chancing a temporal paradox just so that you can play dress-up for a little while longer. Forget it!"

"Please?" Kara begged as her eyes widened and her lip trembled.

Harry fixed his gaze on the ceiling. "I'm not falling for that one again!" he said decisively. "I know that it's not genuine this time."

Kara began sniffing. "Please?" she begged pathetically.

"I said, no," the wizard replied resolutely.

"You're not leaving me any choice here," Kara said resignedly. When he remained silent, she threatened in a singsong tone, "I'll give a detailed account of those girly subjects that I know you can't stand in extremely graphic detail. What will it be this time, the 'it's that time of the month' story, or the 'mechanics of childbirth' explanation?"

Harry looked back down at the blonde-haired woman and asked, "How much time did you say you needed again?"

"Six hours should do it," the girl responded brightly, all traces of her feigned melancholy gone in an instant. In an aside to the other females present, she added, "It's easy when you know how."

Grumbling, Harry extended his SEP field to include the others before Summoning the remote and pressed the appropriate button six times. The women made several surprised noises as the world around them began rewinding in a blur. An instant later, the group found themselves standing in the exact same spot.

"Did it work?" Vixen voiced their collective question.

Their answer came in the form of a pair of footsteps. Their owners rounded the corner into view, and the women stared incredulously as another Harry and Kara walked past them. While the other Kara did not seem to see them and continued rattling off different policies regarding the monitor womb, the other Harry tipped his hat at the time travelers.

The Harry next to the five women mirrored his actions as the other Kara suddenly asked, "What were you doing, Joe?"

"Oh, just giving the 'tip of the hat'," the other Harry answered.

The other Kara looked right through them before asking, "To whom, yourself?"

Both Harrys smiled at the blonde-haired woman's comment before the duplicates continued on their way, leaving the sextet alone once more.

"You knew!" Kara accused him as she punched his shoulder. "You knew that we traveled through time, because you saw our future selves!"

Harry just shrugged mischievously and reduced the SEP field.

Kara shook in impotent fury.

A sudden rush of oncoming air signaled the impending arrival of the Flash. "Hey, ladies!" the Scarlet Speedster greeted suggestively. "Mr. Black, how's it going?"

"Pretty well, Flash," Harry answered with a smile. A sudden thought occurred to him, making him ask, "Would you mind staying close for a little while? Kara and I have a shift coming up in the monitor womb in a few minutes, and I was hoping that you'd be here if we should need you."

"Sure thing, dude," the redhead responded. "Catch ya later!" An instant later, he was gone.

"Well, that's that," Harry replied, satisfied. "As long as none of you attempt to replace your comm. links in the next six hours, we shouldn't have any problems with people knowing that two of you are in the same time frame. Until the party, Ladies." Harry bowed to them and paused just before Apparating. "Oh, and Kara? There's one more thing," he mentioned offhandedly.

"What?" she asked with poorly concealed frustration.

Harry smiled widely. "That's a point for me," he stressed before Apparating back to his room, the sound of his departing laughter still echoing amidst several shrieked expletives from the blonde powerhouse.

"So let me get this straight," Henchgirl stated after Harry had described the strange incidents that occurred earlier that evening. "First, you got shot in the back of the head – where your coat shouldn't have protected you – and only barely felt it, then this 'Fire' woman ignites while you are holding her and you are still unharmed. Did I get everything correct?"

"Pretty much," Harry agreed. "Do you have any ideas?"

"A couple," the witch replied, "but I need to run them by the Doctor. Let me conference-Floo her."

Henchgirl contacted the mediwitch and brought the other woman up to speed.

"I see," the Doctor mentioned, "and you haven't consumed any strange potions, foods, or liquids?"

"Not that I'm aware of, no," Harry supplied immediately.

The women remained silent for a moment before Henchgirl asked, "What about strange animals? Have you encountered any new magical creatures?"

Harry shook his head before voicing the negation. "Not that I can recall," he admitted.

"Hmm..." the Doctor hesitated, "well, it couldn't have been radiation..."

The witch's off-hand comment sparked a dim recollection of his mission to Shambola. "Err..." Harry muttered, "That may not be entirely accurate."

"And how, pray tell, is that?" Henchgirl demanded anxiously.

"Well," the wizard replied, "a few of us were on a mission when we got sucked down to Shambala. While we were helping the locals to

win a small war, Kara came across a large irradiated fragment of her home world. The villagers were using the meteorite, also known as Kryptonite, as a magical focus for the village. Later, I fought a Kryptonite-powered cyborg. He had knocked Kara and Courtney unconscious, and I was sorta upset, so I kinda... ripped the rock out of his chest and ground it to powder." Harry hurried through the last bit in hopes of sneaking it by the two witches. As it turned out, his effort was in vain.

"You did what?" the Doctor screeched. "You know better than to just pick up strange magical objects!"

"But it was a cool glowing rock," Henchgirl attempted to defend him, "and the robot did sort of attack his girlfriend."

"Girlfriend?" both Harry and the Doctor echoed, though for different reasons.

"Kara's not my girlfriend!" the wizard protested. "She's just my friend... who happens to be a girl."

Unwilling to let the topic go, Henchgirl added, "And is dragging you on your second date, is nearly as strong as you are, is learning magic from you, has your same 'saving people thing', and could very well live as long as you without the Sorcerer's Stone."

"Reeeally?" the other woman vocalized, the previous topic of discussion abandoned. "Tell me more."

"Can we get back to finding out why I'm suddenly invulnerable, please?" Harry demanded crossly.

"Don't get your knickers in a twist," the female inventor responded amusedly. "Doctor, I got the whole story from him earlier, so we can talk all about it later."

"Deal!" the mediwitch agreed immediately. "Now, as to this radiation, my first guess is that it must have mutated your genetic code slightly."

"Yeah, that makes sense," Henchgirl seconded. "After all, these 'Kryptonians' are all invulnerable, correct?"

"Well, except for magical attacks, yes..." Harry admitted.

The Doctor clapped decisively. "Well, that settles it. The meteorite must have affected your own unique biology and given you at least some of these extraterrestrials' powers."

"Like Oyuki's gift," Henchgirl added helpfully.

Having been briefed on the origins of Harry's snowflake tattoo during his last physical, the Doctor spoke, "Yes, something like that might have happened if you absorbed a part of the meteorite when you came in contact. Of course, the radiation alone could have triggered these mutations, given your unique physiology. Do these people have any other powers or abilities?"

Harry mentally reviewed the relevant League files. "Well, unassisted flight, super speed, super strength, several optical powers, super breath, super hearing – stuff like that."

"That's..." the Doctor struggled to find a proper term, "an impressive list. Of course, you already had most of those abilities, but it is still amazing that a non-magical being can possess those gifts. Have you noticed any changes other than the physical invulnerability?"

"Uh... no," the mage answered after thinking for a few moments, "and it's been several days since I actually came in contact with the stuff."

"I see," the Doctor acknowledged. "Well, since the effects apparently take time to become evident, I cannot really determine if you'll be affected further. Too bad that you can't penetrate your skin and get me a blood sample..."

Henchgirl, who had been silently in thought, suddenly blurted out, "Use magic! You said that they are as vulnerable to spells as everyone else, so use a small Cutting Hex or something."

Harry considered the suggestion. "That might work," he allowed before testing the hypothesis. He was rewarded with a thin rivulet of crimson liquid. Conjuring a test tube, the wizard gathered a large enough sample before his accelerated healing closed the wound.

"That did the trick," Harry informed the two women. "Heads up, Doctor," he warned before stuffing the container into the flame.

"Got it!" the mediwitch responded. "I'll get started immediately and inform you as soon as I have an answer."

"Thanks, Doctor," Harry replied gratefully. "I appreciate it."

"Think nothing of it," she said generously. "And, Henchgirl, I expect you to report to my laboratory as soon as you two finish talking. I want to hear all about this girl who thinks she's good enough for our boss-slash-brother."

Harry's delayed sense of self-preservation doubled its efforts. "Now, that's not really necessary-" he started to say.

"Oke dokee!" the Potions Mistress interrupted cheerfully whilst simultaneously ignoring Harry's groan. After the other witch closed the connection, Henchgirl changed the subject by asking, "So, what do you think of your costume?"

Harry sighed. "You did a great job, Henchgirl, and these controllable wings are positively wicked, but-"

"They are, aren't they?" the witch interrupted again. "It was a little difficult getting everything working together, but I think you'll find them as good as the genuine article."

Harry blinked. "The what?" he asked hesitantly.

"I made the wings fully functional," the inventor elaborated. "They're as indestructible as your coat and respond to mental commands just like another pair of appendages. You can even use them to fly if you want. The internal musculature is powered off your own magic, so there's nothing to be recharged. I also included enough protections on them so that they can be used as shields against magical and physical attacks, if needed."

"Right... Thank you, Henchgirl," the wizard accepted dubiously before changing the topic yet again. "Do you really think that I should leave my face exposed?"

"Why not?" she countered. "It's not like anyone in that world knows who Harry Potter is, after all. Tonight, you are Gabriel the Archangel, Lord of the Seraphim and Cherubim. Besides," she added mischievously, "I'm sure that your girlfriend will appreciate it!"

Harry groaned. "For the last time, she is not my girlfriend."

"Whatever," the woman replied airily. "Now, how did the dancing instruction go?"

Harry rolled his eyes at the woman's obvious dodge but complied all the same. "I think it went well enough. It required a little temporal manipulation, but I finally managed to get an acceptable score for several songs in a row. At least, I think that 'AAA' stands for 'Acceptable'. Do you think that's good enough or should I try again?"

"Umm..." the woman hesitated before deciding to let him keep his disillusion, "No, I think that's probably good enough for now."

"Really?" Harry asked hopefully.

"Oh, yeah!" the inventor confirmed hastily.

"Well, thanks for everything, Henchgirl," Harry replied. "It's about time to go meet Kara, so I'll talk to you later."

"Knock 'em dead, tiger!" the witch ordered. "I mean, Your Majesty."

Harry sighed again at the raucous feminine laughter and flipped the Zippo shut. It was show time.

It was worse than alien invasions.

It was worse than immortal super villains threatening the world.

It was even worse than shopping trips with Kara or Lois – though only barely.

It was karaoke.

For some insane reason, a few female Leaguers – namely, Diana, Shayera, Zatanna, and Kara - had teamed up against the male population of the space station some time back and decided that the

League needed to have a more formal Halloween party than usual. As such, they argued, all formal parties required dancing.

It was the commonly accepted opinion of the League men that the karaoke idea was added just to spite them.

"It would be fun," the various females argued, "a good way to loosen up a bit." Considering that they were playing host to the incarnation of Death, who was practically the mascot for All Hallow's Eve, it was only proper to celebrate the holiday in style... right?

Completely bulldozing through any objections raised, the femme fatales successfully persuaded the majority of the League members to support their plan. As a result, the entire space station was buzzing with activity and generally doing whatever the women wanted.

And they wanted karaoke.

'It was,' Superman decided, 'certainly one of the stranger quirks of feminine nature.'

Bruce managed to wrangle one concession from the mob; due to potential crises, the party would be held on Earth. Diana was quick to settle on this point, since she was then able to convince the Dark Knight to rent an appropriate, secured venue for their gathering. After all, since all the participants would be masked or otherwise disguised, security was of the utmost concern in order to keep some villain from infiltrating the party. As such, the World's Greatest Detective somehow became responsible for generating what amounted to the world's most sophisticated engraved invitation.

Once the karaoke idea was mentioned, Clark was adamant against being present. Unfortunately for his plans, however, Kara did plan to attend. Even more troublesome, at least for super strong newspaper reporters, his traitorous cousin contacted his fiancée and informed her of the upcoming proceedings. It was at that point that Clark succumbed to the inevitable. For when Lois Lane decided that you were taking her to a Halloween party, you were taking her to a Halloween party.

As it turned out, Harry arrived far ahead of schedule. Everywhere he looked, female perfectionists – and their chain ganged significant

others - were arranging pumpkins or hanging banners. In fact, they had covered the entire space with bats, spiders, and papery ghosts.

Harry smiled a bit sadly at the decorations. It reminded him of Hogwarts, and the very first Halloween that he had celebrated. For a moment, he truly missed Ron and Hermione, but he knew they were better off without him.

Past Halloweens... It brought back the memory of Voldemort, who had killed his parents on Halloween. Even with all his powers, Harry could not go back and save them. He had once brought up the notion in passing, but Henchgirl had carefully told him that messing with life and death in that way would be an extremely bad idea. The specific details had flown over his head, but he did remember the terms 'paradox', 'colossal failure', and 'reload universe'. In order to drive her point home, the petite inventor had simplified her explanation to 'very, very big explosion. Don't, Mr. Black.'

"Excuse me," a voice interrupted his recollections. Harry blinked and found himself facing a white-clad Superman. The Man of Steel's garment had wool attached in several places, and he was currently wearing some sort of floppy-eared bonnet. "Mr. Black?" the Kryptonian asked disbelievingly. "Is that you?"

"Well, it's just 'Gabriel' for tonight, Supersheep," Harry responded with a smile.

"Lois wanted to dress as Little Bo Peep," Clark admitted, as if that answered everything.

When one considered that the wizard had heard all of the gossip regarding the couple straight from the Argosian hearsay distributor herself, Harry understood perfectly. "Ah," the mage answered delicately, "I see. So, what can I do for you?"

"Would you mind holding up the other end of this banner?" the fleeced superhero requested.

Harry shook his head. "Not at all," he replied. After they hung the streamer over the entrance hall, the wizard used his undead speed to assist the other Leaguers in finishing the rest of the decorations. Faster than any of them could follow, candles and Jack-o-Lanterns

were floating in the air, conjured bats were infesting the upper areas of the large hall, and cobwebs adorned every available surface.

Nodding to the others, Harry ambled off to see if he could convince a ghoul or two to stop by for the evening.

The party was going wonderfully. Mr. Black had indeed gotten a couple of ghosts to haunt the hall, and the nearly-completely-transparent duo was happily scaring everyone they could. Combined with the floating candles, the pumpkins, the bats, and all the other decorations - not to mention the gross excess of both food and music - everyone present agreed that it was the perfect Halloween party.

'The keyword being present', a costumed Kara complained to herself. While everyone else had already arrived – even Batman, though he may have had some assistance judging from Diana's satisfied smile – the resident Grim Reaper had yet to show. Clark had informed her earlier that the individual in question had left to fulfill some errand but was unclear on the details or his estimated time of arrival. Granted, the party had started less than an hour ago... but still, Kara felt justified in being annoyed.

One should never let his date wait, especially if that date is Supergirl.

She was grumpily sipping her soda – her cousin had already made very sure that none of the bartenders would serve her anything remotely alcoholic – and watching the last red glow of the setting sun in the low windows, when her enhanced hearing detected two sets of footsteps approaching the main entrance doors. While Kara was at a loss as to his companion, she had no difficulty after their months together recognizing the familiar tread of booted feet as they drew close.

The door opened with an ominous creaking noise, and Kara's mood instantly improved.

"Sorry I'm late," Harry greeted as he approached her stool. "The band's lead singer came down with laryngitis, and I had to fetch a replacement."

Turning to his companion, the wizard instructed, "The band is already backstage, Mr. P. Just head through the stage door and take a left – you can't miss them."

"Thank ya, thank ya very much," the masked dark-haired man muttered before hoisting his guitar case higher and moving in the indicated direction.

Taking a seat next to the girl, Harry commented, "You look very lovely this evening, Milady."

Kara suddenly wished that she had dressed up as something other than a fairytale princess. It had seemed like such a perfect idea at the time, and the dress had looked beautiful in the store's mirror, but now it seemed like such a silly idea.

Her not quite boyfriend – though not for lack of trying on her part - wore a modern tunic and pants ensemble with hints of gold, brass and pale-blue, which - Kara was happy to note - suited him. The truly impressive parts of his costume, however, were two fold. First, he bore a pair of magnificent black wings from his shoulder blades. Unlike some of the 'angels' present in the room, his ebony appendages moved as if they were as much a part of him as Shayera's wings were to her.

The second was that she could see his face clearly. She decided that she definitely approved of this move, as she could now observe his glowing green eyes and handsome face without impediment. Curiously, he seemed to have a thin scar in the shape of a lightening bolt upon his forehead.

With his first, disastrous date with Cho in mind, Harry had vowed to make this one less traumatic. Keeping in mind the various courtesies that the Doctor, Henchgirl, and the Count forced upon him, Harry took Kara's unresisting hand and raised it to his lips. "Happy Samhain, Your Highness," he greeted more formally.

Kara had little stars in her eyes when he let go of her hand, smiling dreamily.

Frankly, it worried Harry more than a bit. "Um... are you alright?" he asked hesitantly.

She nodded, still grinning happily. "Sure, even though you did leave me waiting for an hour. I'll yell at you later, though. Come on!" She started to drag him to the dancing floor, before pausing halfway to ask, "Er... you do dance, right?"

Harry grinned, remembering the disastrous Yule Ball so long ago, as well as all the ribbing he had received from his friends during his practice sessions these past few days. "As a matter of fact, I'm famed for it."

Pat Dugan, who was hovering near the punch bowl in his Christmas tree outfit, noticed the other man's entrance and softly murmured, "So that's what Daniel was trying to convey!"

Shayera, who was currently balancing about a dozen cookies on her plate, overheard the man and questioned, "What are you talking about?"

"The Book of Daniel," the mecha pilot explained. "He was distraught over a vision he had received regarding the fate of Israel and their oppressor, the Persians. He eventually collapsed near a river when the angel assigned to watch over Israel came to console him and explain the vision."

"Okay..." Shayera commented slowly. "So what?"

Pat looked at her humorously before tilting his head in Harry's direction. "He was described as appearing just like that."

"Really?" Hawkgirl inquired speculatively as she watched the black-winged angel dancing with the princess. "Did it ever give his name?"

"No," Pat shook his head, "only that it wasn't Michael. Most people believe that it was Gabriel, the Left Hand of God. Many also refer to him as the Angel of Fire and Snow who rides the sword, as his earlier demonstration in Shambala proved quite firmly. A few vague references even suggestion a role as an Angel of Vengeance and/or Death."

Shayera just shook her head disbelievingly. "Well, that dovetails pretty well with some intel we gathered earlier today. He was ID'ed as Gabriel by someone who had traveled through time and saw the

after-effects of the war in Heaven, and he later as much as admitted it himself."

"It makes a girl wonder," the Thanagarian suddenly announced, "does this count as dressing as himself?"

As Zatanna passed by her position, Diana caught her attention and praised, "That's a great singer on the stage right now. Where did you find him?"

The masked performer was enthusiastically belting 'Hound Dog' into the microphone. His face was unrecognizable courtesy of the mask he wore, but it still failed to hide a pompadour-style black hair.

"I didn't," the sorceress admitted. "Mr. Black made the arrangements when the original singer came down sick. He said something about this guy owing him a favor."

All too soon according to some people – and not soon enough according to others - the vocalist left the stage and a karaoke machine was activated. Oddly enough, this event coincided with numerous 'emergencies' requiring the immediate presence of various male superheroes present.

Diana took the stage and scooped up the microphone. "It's time for the part you've all been waiting for!" she yelled unnecessarily. "Who wants to go first?"

Harry grinned at the distant lack of male voices in the crowd's response. If it had not been for a rather helpful potion, he would have been terrified of the upcoming festivities. Fortunately - for his self-image, at the least - the funny-tasting concoction allowed him to sing as well as his costume implied.

He still wondered if that constituted as cheating; he was dressed as an angel, after all. He finally decided to let the matter rest. It was not as if they were actually competing or anything.

As it happened, Superman was the first victim of the karaoke machine. Of course, a rather serious shove from a certain journalistically inclined Little Bo Peep may have influenced his decision slightly. In any event, the other males present were simply

happy that it was not them. Once the Kryptonian had reached the stage, he did a fair rendition of It's Not Easy to Be Me.

When his song finished, it fell to Clark to choose the next victim. His eyes fell on Mr. Black, who had been one of the loudest voices urging him to take the stage. Superman smiled at a chance to collect his revenge as he singled the dimension-hopping wizard out of the crowd.

Harry walked up to the stage, a bit nervous. He sincerely hoped that the potions worked. The karaoke machine shuffled its database of songs a few times before ultimately settling on a tune by the Blue Oyster Cult. The text began scrolling across the screen and Harry smiled brightly.

Don't Fear the Reaper was one of his favorite songs, after all.

After several other performances – including Kara's ironic rendition of Krystal Harris's Supergirl – the dancing resumed. While Harry would never admit it to anyone else, he had enjoyed the evening's festivities far more than he originally anticipated. In fact, if things continued as they were, he could very well be experiencing his best Halloween to date.

That realization alone should have sparked some warning. If not that, then the old adage 'bad things come in threes' certainly should have roused his suspicion.

Unfortunately, that particular universal truth bred true yet again while Harry and Kara were enjoying a slow dance amidst Earth's greatest heroes. Just as the wizard prepared to dip his dancing partner, a section of the roof exploded and a golden-masked brunette woman floated down through the newest entrance. Based on his Mage Sight, the League's reports, and Merlin's accounts on the fall of Camelot, Harry surmised that the old-fashion gowned woman was none other than Morgan le Fay.

Stepping between Kara and Morgan, Harry frowned at the hovering sorceress as an enraged Jason Blood bellowed, "Harpy! I'm going to kill you for this!"

"Not now, my immortal beloved," the female mage stated dismissively, before casting some sort of petrification ward around

the hall's occupants. "I require the use of Caledfwich and have sensed its presence once more."

Relieved that his coat blocked the wide-area Body Bind, Harry tilted his head to one side. "And what do you want with my sword?" the wizard demanded loudly.

The woman's eyes flashed yellow behind her mask. "How did you break my enchantment?" she demanded crossly.

Harry snorted. "Please! I've taught that trick to prepubescent children! It's not that difficult to counter." Smiling nastily, he added, "Or to master."

The woman fired a hex at him from her airborne position - which Harry promptly shielded and reflected back at her. "Who are you?" she demanded crossly.

Smiling wryly, Harry flexed his wings before stating, "Gabriel, or, if you prefer..." He mentally ordered his wings and tunic to shift into his typical traveling cloak and hat.

"Gabriel Van Helsing?" the woman breathed disbelievingly.

Her voice carried greatly in the otherwise silent room, and Harry easily caught the same name other long-lived vampires had called him in the past. Smiling darkly as she unknowingly confirmed Merlin's theory that she was indeed a demonic vampire, Harry raised his voiced and countered, "The name's actually Mr. Black these days, but nice try. Now," Harry's voice cooled several degrees, "why do you seek my sword?"

"Your sword?" the vampires demanded. "It was Arthur's sword once upon a time."

Harry shook his head. "Actually, it was loaned to Arthur. He happened to break his sword and needed a replacement. Since he was such a nice guy, a few good Samaritans loaned him a better weapon for the remainder of his life. When he was finally defeated - due to your efforts - he ordered it returned to Lady Viviane of the Lake, who passed it on to me. Now, kindly answer my question. I'm not asking again."

"I require its power to complete a ritual to restore my son," she finally supplied, "and I'm not leaving here until I have it."

Recalling the fate of her son Mordred – the root cause of Arthur's and Camelot's fall - Harry shook his head again as a smile played about his lips. "Well, you're welcome to my sword when I'm no longer breathing."

Morgan's eyes flashed again. "I will not be denied!" she roared, and several scores of armored Inferi-like trolls shimmered into being in the auditorium. "Destroy him!" she ordered while pointing to Harry.

Grinning wolfishly, the wizard drew the sword that held her interest from his gauntlet. His smile grew larger as it burst alight, causing the trolls to lumber to a stop. He had experimented with the weapon while on Avalon and had discovered that Henchgirl was indeed correct about it being a powerful magical focus. Much like his scythe, the sword seemed to draw latent energy from his surroundings to boost his efforts. Unlike the scythe, however, the sword's side effects did not seem to cause either a chill or unease amongst spectators. In fact, Harry discovered that most individuals felt comforted, if anything. He ultimately determined that only dark mages and creatures shied away from the drawn weapon – which was quite acceptable to him, Harry decided.

Combining the sword and his gauntlets, Harry targeted the trolls and cast a particular curse to get the armored figures 'in the proper frame of mind'. After the resultant scarlet haze faded, he found several members of the petrified League covered in pulverized troll.

"Oops," Harry mumbled to himself, "I always forget about the splatter at the end." Shaking his head, the immortal Mage turned back to a fuming sorceress. "If you're quite finished wasting my time...?" he demanded sarcastically.

Le Fay responded with a hail of spells, all of which Harry evaded, shielded, or batted back at her with a still-glowing Caledfwich.

"You're pretty good," Harry congratulated, "for a demonic vampire hag, that is."

The woman responded to Harry's goad just as Merlin had transcribed in his own encounters with her. "I'm unlike any vampire

you've ever fought before," she protested, "because I'm the one who's going to put you in your grave!"

Harry grinned wickedly, and a certain female mage of over fifteen centuries of unlife began to regret not leaving well enough alone with Mordred's defeat. Her regret grew tremendously as the wizard directed his own magical salvo upon her. Deciding that discretion was the better part of valor, Morgan turned to flee – only to receive several bone-shattering blasts to her lower extremities before getting pulled hard to ground.

Calmly approaching the limp and battered heap, Harry raised his sword into a ready position as he stalked his prey. "You would destroy countless lives and unleash untold obscenities against nature – just so that you could displace a rightful government and appease your spoiled brat," the wizard accused darkly. "You have cheated Death and consorted with the worst of dark creatures, all in a bid for a throne that you yourself destroyed ages ago."

Harry's voice grew, if possible, even colder. "Your depravations end now."

From her collapsed position on the floor, Morgan le Fay desperately tried to use her amulet to amplify her spells, to no avail. Harry easily batted aside her half-baked attacks as he continued to advance. With a slight gesture, Morgan's amulet and apparently magical mask flew from her person and landed in the man's grip, revealing the yellow eyes and ridged forehead characteristic of the demonic species of vampire.

"Please, make it stop!" the vampiress begged. "What the hell are you?"

"Vengeance. Retribution." Harry smiled forebodingly. "Death. Now, stop your whining! Surely, two mere broken legs cannot stop a demon of your renown. Mend your legs and stand up - this is a duel to the death, after all."

The woman just whimpered pitifully. "Please, God, have mercy!"

Harry just looked at her disbelievingly. "You willingly sold your soul to the demon who turned you, all out of a misguided lust for power. You've spent over fifteen centuries mercilessly killing the blameless

and the righteous. I doubt that God's feeling all that merciful at the moment – I know I'm not."

He shook his head and commented, "You had to know that you would have to answer for your crimes one day. Time's up." Harry raised his sword over the woman's torso.

The pathetic creature's eyes bulged. "No! Wait!"

"Goodbye, Demon," the wizard stated coldly before he plunged the glowing blade into the vampire's heart. As he expected, the ancient sword served just fine as a stake, and the ashes of the widely feared Morgan le Fay coated the floor at his feet.

Harry turned at the commotion as the witch's bindings began failing and the League members broke free.

"Joe, what was that?" Kara demanded as she stared at the pile of dust. "Was Le Fay really a vampire?"

Harry nodded. "One of the soulless variety. When one of that particular breed drains its victim to the point of death, the soul leaves and the body is inhabited by a demon. It may have the movements, the memories, even the personality of the person it took over, but it's still a demon at the core. There is no halfway."

"But we have seen her out in daylight several times," Superman commented. "Aren't... vampires allergic to sunlight or something?"

"Usually," Harry agreed, "however, this mask is heavily enchanted." He looked at the item again with Mage Sight before adding, "If I am not mistaken, this bears a type of shadowy shield, which would be enough to prevent a vampire from spontaneously combusting due to ultraviolet light."

Batman, who was unsurprisingly dressed as himself, opened his mouth to speak but was interrupted by Jason Blood's sudden collapse. The man shook as if in a seizure before his form blurred. Suddenly, there were two incumbent figures on the ground, only one of which was human.

"The terms of Merlin's spell have been met," Jason realized aloud as he took in the appearance of the hell spawn who had shared a body with him for well over a millennia.

"At long last, I'm free," Etrigan growled.

Noticeably keeping his sword in hand, Harry spoke, "Which begs the question of exactly what you'll do with that freedom." The underlying threat was quite apparent to all those present.

The stocky demon prince laughed.

Harry wanted to cringe.

"I have had my fill of this mortal realm," the demon admitted, "and do not wish to remain here any longer than I must. So you can put that sword away now."

Harry looked at the unfettered demon closely before finally complying.

"Well, Blood, I guess this is it," Etrigan continued as he turned to face the disbelieving Jason. "Try not to get your self killed," he finally said. "I won't be around to save you the next time."

With that heart-warming communiqué completed, the demon lord turned his attention to Batman. "You're one of the few humans that I've actually liked, so I'll give you this piece of advice for free," Etrigan informed the detective. "Just tell the wench and have done with it! You're being foolish and its starting to get annoying."

Harry was next on the demon's personal address list. "You're an interesting being, Black," Etrigan admitted after studying the dimension-hopping wizard. "I owe you my freedom, and even demons pay their debts." The short figure took one of Harry's hands and trapped it between both of his. The wizard felt a brief burning sensation on his palm before Etrigan released him. Harry looked down at the offended appendage and blinked. Upon his palm was a faint scar in the shape of an open flame.

"A gift of the House of Belial," the demon prince explained. "The harpy's enchantments alerting her to my presence would have dragged out our game of cat and mouse until the end of days. In

payment for your services, I pledge the loyalty of my line; neither I nor any under my command will harm you and yours, or those under your protection."

Unable to form any greater response, Harry settled for a dignified, "Thank you."

Nodding to himself, Etrigan stepped back and opened a fiery portal floating in midair. Through the vortex, Harry could make out what appeared to be a Hell dimension.

"Well, this is the end," the demon addressed the gathered superheroes and their guests. Giving the crowd a final look over, Etrigan smirked and added, "Try not to cry." The short figure then marched without hesitation through the portal, which drew shut after his passing.

"Hmm," Harry commented as he took in the demolished concert hall and disbelieving expressions, "this has been far more interesting than I originally expected." Smiling, he sent out several charms, removing the remnants of the undead trolls' innards and Morgan's ashes, as well as repairing the roof.

When the wizard was finally assured that everything had been restored to its proper condition, he transfigured his clothes back into his Halloween costume. Harry extended his hand to Kara as he glanced over at the musicians.

"What do you say, mates? Shall we try that last number again?" he inquired.

An instant later, a stately melody filled the auditorium as Harry led the blonde Argosian in a waltz.

As the party finally wound down, Diana called Kara away on some matter, leaving Harry leaning against a wall as the other Leaguers began departing. Dispelling the animated decorations, the wizard fetched one of the remaining drinks and turned to leave – only to come face-to-face with Gotham's chief vigilante.

"Good evening, Batman," Harry greeted. "Enjoy the party?"

"I've been through worse," the Caped Crusader admitted.

The wizard nodded in agreement. "I can imagine. I don't care much for hobnobbing with snobs myself; that's one of the hazards of your particular secret identity that I would find most annoying."

Ignoring Harry's attempt at conversation, the Dark Knight instead commented, "I have something to pass on to you from a mutual feminine acquaintance."

"Oh?" the mage asked curiously. "Does this have anything to do with your lady friend that Etrigan mentioned?"

The costumed Bruce Wayne glared at him. If Harry was honest with himself, he would have to admit that Severus Snape, while not as impressively outfitted, did possess a superior glare.

Not that either man's attempt at intimidation ever succeeded where he was concerned anyway.

"No," the Batman intoned from between clenched teeth, "I refer to Pamela Isley, not..."

The other man stopped speaking, but Harry recalled enough of Kara's previous commentary to fill in the blanks for himself. "Diana?" Harry half-asked, half-stated.

"That is irrelevant," the Caped Crusader barked.

"She's many things, but I'd hardly refer to her as irrelevant," Harry noted.

"I'm not discussing this here," the masked man stated before turning around and striding out of the room.

"Fair enough," Harry agreed amiably as he fell in step beside the other man. "We can discuss Pamela – and Diana – on the way."

"On the way?" Batman asked in a dead tone.

"Back to Gotham," Harry answered. "I assume that you have your plane stashed somewhere nearby – we can speak in private on the return trip to get whatever it is that Isley gave you. You know, get to know one another and all that male-bonding rot."

The other man drew to a halt and looked at Harry with an expression that he would describe as disbelief on anyone else. "Don't you have something more important to do?"

"Not at all," Harry rejected the polite attempt at dismissal easily. "The rest of my evening's completely free."

The Batman started moving again. "Dare I ask why you are so intent on discussing this matter?"

Harry thought, yet again, how eerily similar the Bruce-Diana relationship paralleled that of his two oldest friends Ron and Hermione. Even their arguments seemed similar in nature, if not content.

"Oh, I have several reasons," Harry admitted, "not the least of which is that this constant circling thing that the two of you are doing is growing tiresome – both for me and the others. The main reason, though, is that I like you. You remind me a great deal of myself, actually, back before a couple of my friends convinced me that I could maintain both a personal and professional life. As one professional loner to another, I'd like to help you avoid the same mistake that I made."

Gotham's chief hero cocked his head to the side as he fired a grapple onto the roof of an adjacent building. "I don't consider sparing others from the rigors of my line of work a mistake," he intoned gruffly before rapidly flying up through the air.

"Your family cares for you as much as you care for them, Bruce," Harry readily replied once the pair alighted onto the roof. "From everything that I can gather, Dick, Barbara, and Tim have the same drive to improve the world as you. They would have eventually started out on their own, anyway; their relationship with you only allows them to do it better and safer."

Batman remotely unlocked the stealth aircraft and opened the cockpit's hatch before shaking his head. "I should have never encouraged it. What sort of father allows his children to get into this business, anyway?"

"From what Alfred has told me the last few times that I've dropped by to check on him, a fine one," the wizard advised the other man as they both slid into the aircraft.

"Yes, he mentioned that you seemed fond of that tea of his," the scion of the Wayne family noted as the Batwing took to the sky. "The American blends not satisfactory?"

Harry made a disgruntled noise. "Bloody awful," he complained, "and don't change the subject. You've done the best you could to raise your sons properly, and the only complaint that either of them have made is your desire to discard them. I'm sure that the whole Nightwing scenario can speak for itself."

The wizard took a moment to reflect on the odd family dynamic. "This may come as a shock to you, but both of your charges are proud to have you as a father figure. And while Diana certainly isn't in the market for a father, she'd be proud to claim you as well."

After enduring several seconds of intense silence, Harry added, "Yeah, it confused me to no end as well."

"I... can't," the cowled figure muttered painfully as he keyed in a navigational course with more force than was strictly necessary. "For one thing, Diana is a coworker. Those sorts of relationships never work."

His passenger snorted. "Green Arrow and Canary, Question and Huntress, -"

"Lantern and Hawkgirl," the other man interrupted succinctly.

Harry could not help but break out in laughter. "One relationship has a rocky patch and you're ready to throw in the towel?" he asked disbelievingly. "There's no possible way that a man like you would give in that easily – for anything. You'll have to do better than that!"

The wizard could have sworn that the plane's pilot was growling. "You know about the Kronos incident?"

"Hijacked you, Lantern, and Diana, and the three of you chased him all over the time stream?" Harry summarized.

"Correct," the detective succinctly confirmed. "We traveled five decades into the future, and I met my future self. There was no Diana or anyone else with him... me. It obviously isn't meant to be."

Harry was torn between humor and pity. Pity finally winning out, the wizard spoke, "Bruce, what you saw was one possible future out of an infinite number of futures, which was further dependant on both your decisions at the time and Kronos' manipulations." He thought back to the words of the shopkeeper that he confronted in Diagon Alley. "There is no destiny, my friend," he continued, "We are not locked onto a path. Your future is whatever you make of it. If you are content with being a lonely and bitter old man, then you will be. On the other hand, if you actively embrace your family, then you won't be. It's a simple concept, really."

Surprisingly enough, the Bat conjured yet another excuse as the Batwing began approaching the outer limits of Gotham City. "It would never work, anyway. She's an immortal warrior from an island of women, and I'm... well..."

"Technically, she's only ageless," Harry clarified. "Amazon's aren't really immortal; they can die just as you can. True, Diana is physically stronger than you and can fly, but that's pretty much the extent of it."

"Which is all the more reason to keep her away from my work," Bruce contended. "She is unfamiliar with the kinds of criminals that I routinely face, any of which would not hesitate to kill her just to get to me."

The wizard shrugged. "So train her," he replied easily. "Personally, I think that she would make an excellent partner for you. You're both stubborn, motivated people who often reach the same conclusion through different methods. I've seen how good a team the two of you make, and I know that your parents would be delighted to have Diana for a daughter-in-law. For what it's worth, I've got a good feeling about the two of you."

The World's Greatest Detective remained silent as he brought the stealth airplane on approach to the Batcave's vehicular entrance. As the Batwing began descending to the runway, he quietly uttered, "Thank you. I'll... think about it."

"That's all anyone can ask, mate," Harry accepted as the plane came to a stop.

Changing the topic, Batman produced an interesting species of rose and explained its origins, as well as the missive from the plant's creator. A short Batmobile ride later found Harry standing inside Gotham University's small hospital, still wondering exactly how he kept getting involved in this sort of thing.

Now, Harry faced the incumbent green form of the woman who had propositioned him on his last visit to Gotham City.

Pamela Isley or, as she was known in certain circles, Poison Ivy.

When Batman showed no signs of proceeding beyond the wall-height window partitioning the recovery area, Harry shrugged to himself and casually strolled through the glass. Greeting the woman calmly while inwardly pleading for her to restrain her more outgoing tendencies, the wizard conjured up a chair and sat himself at her bedside.

"Hello, Ms. Isley," Harry began once the woman seemed content to remain silent. Wondering yet again if the Gothamites' taciturn tendencies could be due to a corrupt water supply, he continued, "My name is Joe Black. I wanted to thank you for your gift the other day; Batman delivered it a few moments ago and said that you wish to speak with me."

Harry was happy to find the woman much more composed than she was at their last meeting as she explained her near-death experience and subsequent new outlook on life. Once she was finished, she leaned back in the hospital bed and waited for her visitor to acknowledge her tale.

"Well," Harry said finally, "I'm glad to hear that you've decided to 'turn over a new leaf' – no pun intended. What do you plan to do now?"

"For the moment, stay here and recover," Pamela replied. "The doctors are still confirming that I won't have a relapse. As for when I'm cleared to leave, however... that's where you hopefully will come in."

"Oh?" the wizard questioned. "How so?"

"I want to make a difference, Mr. Black," the redhead answered honestly. "I've tried to use my influence over nature in the past to improve things, but I can see now that I've only made things worse. When I decided to return and do the right thing instead of taking the easy path, the Green told me that you would know where I could do the most good."

"I see," Harry uttered in an uncommitted tone. Her last statement struck an uncomfortably familiar chord with Dumbledore's speech after Cedric Diggory's death.

'Was it only two years ago?' Harry asked of himself. 'It seems like it happened in another lifetime.'

He considered her plea for a few moments before one of Henchgirl's offhand comments resonated in his mind. "I may have one idea," Harry informed the woman, "but it would require you to eventually relocate dimensions. Do you have any family or close friends that would prevent you from leaving?"

"Not really," Pamela finally answered in a confused tone, "except maybe Harley. Why would I need to move to another dimension?"

Her first comment sent Harry's mind searching through his recollections of the League's rogues gallery and came up with one distinct possibility. "Do you refer to Harley Quinn, the Joker's accomplice, by any chance?" the wizard demanded.

"Yes," she answered hesitantly, "and I know that her record – and mine, for that matter – is far from outstanding, but she really only acted out because of the Joker's influence."

Harry could tell by the way that she said the insane criminal's name that, while Harley may have the redhead's sympathy, the Joker most certainly did not.

"To answer your question," the wizard replied, "I was entertaining the notion of inviting you to my realm. My Potions Mistress and resident physician were both telling me that they wanted to hire a herbologist for several rare plant breeds, but they have not yet found a suitable candidate. Something about the working conditions being

too stressful or some such. I thought that your abilities with all things green might fit the bill. Interested? I pay well, and your efforts will be greatly appreciated."

Pamela blinked. "You want to give me a job?" she asked confusedly. "Why?"

"Correct," Harry offered with a smile. "You would work with my other Research and Development staff, helping them to discover new and important things. One of their existing tasks is the development of equipment for my various field agents, who are scattered around the world keeping a watch on trouble spots. You know, dark wizard risings, oncoming apocalypses, unexpected Hellmouth openings... things like that. I can let you speak to Henchgirl, our Potions Mistress, for the details if you're interested."

The former eco-terrorist smiled. "Oh, I'm definitely interested. I just worry about what would become of Harley if I left. You wouldn't happen to have need of a creative young woman with a fascination for pranks, would you? She's very inventive, if perhaps a little misdirected."

Harry looked thoughtful. "As it happens, I own controlling interest in two separate companies along those lines. She would be welcomed in either – provided that she is serious about reforming as well," he finished seriously. "I would need to meet her first, though, and if I think that she would be a liability, then she stays here. Agreed?"

"Deal," the woman accepted instantly.

"Great," Harry confirmed. "Now, in the meanwhile, I presume that you will need a legitimate source of revenue?"

Pamela's eyes darted to the lurking Dark Knight before returning to the wizard. "Certain parties would no doubt prefer that option. Why?"

The wizard grinned. "Well, I'm thinking about purchasing this nice little nightclub I visited earlier tonight over in San Francisco. I think a few friends of mine from the League might want a job there, but I'll still have a few openings for both entertainers and staff. Do you think that you or your friend might like a change of scenery until my business in this reality is concluded?"

The green woman blinked. "Are you serious?"

"No, I'm Joe," Harry answered amusedly, "but the offer is genuine."

"You know, when I was little, I wanted more than anything to be a famous singer," Isley mused nostalgically.

The wizard shrugged. "Tell you what," he decided, "I'll drop by tomorrow and let you know how everything went at the bank. We can make the rest of the temporary housing arrangements and what-not then. Is that okay with you?"

"Perfectly," the woman readily agreed. "When would you like me to speak with Ms... Henchgirl, was it?"

"Is now good for you?" Harry asked humorously. At her nod, Harry retrieved his Zippo and contacted the female inventor. After explaining the situation, the wizard turned the lighter over to the redhead and left the two women to haggle over the details.

Walking back through the transparent barrier, Harry nodded to Batman. "Well, that went well," he mentioned.

"Are you aware of those two women's previous criminal histories?" the detective asked gruffly. "I would not consider either one to be worth the hassle."

"Perhaps," Harry offered. "Blame it on my spending too much time with the old man, but I felt that she deserved a second chance. And if she and her friend both work out, I win all the way around."

"I hope that you know what you're doing," the Caped Crusader intoned, carefully choosing to ignore the first part of the other man's response.

'So do I,' Harry silently agreed. 'So do I.'

A/N: Thus concludes Chapter Nine of Terminal Justice. I hope that you found this latest entry entertaining. For those of you who didn't catch it, I included a scene from Neil Gaiman's *The Books of Magic*, as well as one brief exchange from Michael and the anime series *Hellsing*. Also, kudos to callide_mori for the "Happy Halloween" omake.

A special thanks goes out to James, Chris, Mitchell, D.J., and Manga_loki for their assistance in fine-tuning this chapter.

I'm at a loss as to how to handle the exposure to Kryptonite/Etrigan's gift, since I don't want to venture further into the realms of super!Harry. That is, a protagonist without any limits, possessing abilities beyond any rational explanation. I recognize that a certain amount of 'super'ness is inevitable, what with the Vampire-Werewolf-Re'em bloodtype and the active membership with the JLU. That said, I figured that physical invulnerability from non-magical sources was a "safe" pick for Harry to possess from the Kryptonite exposure, seeing as how his coat essentially gave him that power anyway.

As for Etrigan's addition, I was thinking giving Harry the ability to control Hellfire (sort of the opposite of the Japanese Ice Demon's gift). Etrigan has historically possessed several other powers, as the excerpt from Wikipedia mentions. "Even among demons, Etrigan is considered to be extremely powerful. He has above superhuman strength (mystically enhanced) to the degree of literally punching people to the moon and, being an immortal creature, cannot die. He has a high degree of resistance to injury and can project hellfire from his body; usually from his mouth. He has a very high command of magic: other powers include mystically enhanced fangs and claws, enhanced senses, super speed, agility, telepathy and precognition as well. His healing factor can handle an incredible amount of damage, up to recovering from wounds that have removed large sections of his body. His powers can be extended by other magical devices, such as the Crown of Horns."

Harry arguably already has the advanced healing powers from the phoenix tears still in his system and Henchgirl's various experiments. Additionally, his werewolf/vampire biology supplies the mystically enhanced fangs, claws, senses, speed, and agility. I figured that the only remaining powers that Harry could not already command would be the precognition and telepathy, and my "adjusting" of the latent curse scar borders on dark arts precognition.

At the moment, my vision of the Hellfire abilities is somewhat akin to Ghost Rider. Mainly, the ability to shield himself with fire, throw balls of flame... that sort of thing.

Please feel free to share your opinions on the above, or suggestions on where to take Terminal Justice next. As it is, I plan to include a "Meet the Kents" scene(s) and possibly a trip to Paradise Island/Grecian Underworld in addition to a few of the submitted omakes. Aside from that, all that remains are the episodes "Far from Home", "Ancient History", and the season finale. As such, I expect to be finished in the next 3-5 chapters. So, if you have any story arcs that you would like to see implemented, please share them soon.

Thank you for your interest, and please remember to review.

Previous Chapter
Terminal Justice

Chapter 9: Trick or Treat
by Overkill

Next Chapter

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Chapter 10: The Next Generation, Part One

by Overkill

Next Chapter

Disclaimer: This is a cross between JLA (Season 5) and Rorschach's Blot's Make A Wish Story. Harry Potter is owned by JK Rowling and various publishers. Henchgirl, The Professor, and other such objects are Rorschach's creation. DC Comics own the Justice League and associated characters/plot devices. The lack of plot, however, can be attributed to me.

The Next Generation, Part One

Superman was, to put it simply, dumbfounded.

The League's founding members were holding yet another called meeting, this time in regards to the series of unusual events surrounding the previous night's Halloween festivities. As had become the unmentioned standard of the most recent called meetings, their discussions involved the oft-perplexing Mr. Black.

After Diana and Shayera had informed the others as to the situation in Bludhaven with Roulette's ill-fated Metabrawl comeback, Bruce gave a short summary of the transpired events in Gotham.

While the news that Mr. Black seemed compelled to rehabilitate both Poison Ivy and Harley Quinn was somewhat unexpected, Clark was able to accept this latest turn of events with a practiced ease. After all, if he was able to watch the immortal personage casually dispose of Morgan le Fay – who had repeatedly run roughshod over the entire Inner Council multiple times and was apparently a master vampire as well - then the man adopting two career criminal femme fatales as pet projects was quite tolerable.

No, the bewildering aspect of the meeting became evident later, when Diana presented her proposal for 'immortal guest protocols'.

It was absurd – if not downright frightening - in its own way. In fact, the only one who nodded in approval was Batman.

"This is good," the Dark Knight approved gruffly. "There are a few things I would add to it, however," Bruce added as he perused the document.

Clark shared a look with the other three, and they silently reached an agreement. "In that case," the Man of Steel voiced, "you and Diana are relieved of regular League duties for the upcoming week to concentrate on revising this strategy."

Batman shot the Kryptonian a suspicious look. "Don't you think that is a little excessive?"

Superman returned the accusing gaze innocently. "Not at all," he replied guilefully. "We really should address this scenario in the event of future... visits. Since Diana has the most experience with Immortals and you specialize in contingency plans, it only makes sense to pair the two of you together on this project."

Bruce looked at the others speculatively before nodding briskly. "All right," he agreed. "Is there any other matters to be discussed?"

The others quickly shook their heads in the negative.

"Fine," Bruce barked conclusively. "Come on, Diana. We can retrieve Black's blood sample from the Bio-vault and take it to the cave for further analysis."

After they left the room, Green Lantern spoke up. "I don't believe it," he finally said, sounding as shocked as Clark felt. "I read it, but I still don't believe it."

Shayera shook her head. "She's been hanging around Batman; what did you expect?"

John frowned. "But this..." he trailed off questioningly.

Clark rubbed his temples tiredly. "They both need a vacation," Superman finally explained. "Bruce doesn't take one unless he's completely incapacitated, and he's been under a lot of stress recently. I'm sure that you've all heard about Diana's comments at the Global Warming conference. This planning session will allow them some time to relax while still doing something useful."

Wally nodded hesitantly. "Yeah, I understand that," the Scarlet speedster admitted, "and I know that Bats has a protocol for everything - but to have Diana come up with a protocol for coffee? They definitely need a stress break."

Harry Apparated back into one of the many Watchtower corridors, whistling happily all the while. His morning business transactions had all gone off without a hitch; in fact, the wizard soon discovered upon his inquiry that the bank had foreclosed upon Bewitched due to a lack of payment on Tannarak's part. As a result, the settling price for the real estate was laughably miniscule.

Once the paperwork was signed and Harry paid the entire remaining debt in cash – which sparked several very amusing reactions – he Apparated to the other coast and paid Pamela Isley her promised visit. The wizard swapped stories for a few minutes before informing the botanical beauty that she would have both living quarters and a legitimate occupation once the doctors released her. His obligations for the morning fulfilled, Harry bid the redhead adieu and Apparated back to the Watchtower until the time came for Zatanna's ward inspection that afternoon.

As the wizard was wandering aimlessly around the station, the Potter scion suddenly caught sight of a young Native American leaning weakly against a wall for support. His tanned face bore an inadequately masked expression of pain.

"Are you all right?" Harry asked despite the obvious as he deliberated on whether his assistance would be appreciated. "By the way, I don't believe we've met before. I'm called Mr. Black."

"I'm Longshadow," the other man replied, "and it's no wonder that we haven't met. I hardly leave my room anymore."

It did not escape Harry's notice that the man ignored the original question.

"Well, maybe I can help you go to wherever you are going now," Harry offered tentatively. "No offence meant, but you look like you could use a hand."

Embarrassment crossed the young man's face for a second. "None taken," he muttered lowly. "I imagine that I don't look very

impressive right now. Don't trouble yourself, though. I'm just returning from the med bay, and my room isn't far from here."

Harry took the unspoken request at face value and pulled the large man's arm around his shoulders. "Well then, we won't have to walk far," Harry replied cheerfully in hopes of brightening the other man's spirits. "You said that you were just in the med bay. If you don't mind me asking, why did you leave when you're still obviously in pain?"

Longshadow smiled painfully. "The pain medications aren't working anymore, not even morphine." He sighed for a moment before adding, "It's a long story."

"Believe it or not," Harry responded as he helped the other man open his apartment's door, "I have all the time in the world. How about you start by explaining why morphine is no longer helping you."

The young man sighed deeply as Harry helped the former Ultiman into bed. "Well," he began, "some time ago, my life was relatively normal..."

Stopping periodically due to physical discomfort, the young man eventually managed to convey his tragic story. His voice, weak to begin with, grew gradually fainter after a few sentences, but he seemed determined to tell the story.

"... and after some time, I felt it... that my body was getting weaker and I could no longer help on missions. Soon after that, I wasn't even able to go through my normal, strain-free day without being in pain. Of course, they did their best to help me, but painkillers can only do so much. No matter how hard they tried, they just couldn't slow the degeneration process, let alone revert it. Now I've reached the point where nothing helps anymore, and I sometimes wake up not sure what is real and what is just a planted memory. That's mostly why I've been going to the med bay every few days, to reassure myself that there actually is a real world outside of this room, with people whom I can call my friends. Not that it will matter soon... I don't have much time left, anyway."

"Well, maybe I can help you, with the pain if nothing else," Harry wondered aloud while taking out his Zippo. "Henchgirl!" he called.

"Mr. Black!" called the familiar voice, disproportionately cheerful considering the mood of the conversation the two men had just had. "How are you?" the witch questioned.

"I am well, Henghgirl," Harry explained. "I'm calling on behalf of a friend. Can you send me the strongest painkilling potion you have in stock?"

Henghgirl readily agreed. "Sure thing, Mr. Black. What happened?"

"I'll tell you later," the wizard pledged. "Now, about that potion..."

"I'm on it!" True to her word, a bottle appeared mere moments later.

Harry smiled at the woman's prompt service. "Thank you, Henghgirl. I'll call you later. I have to have a word with the Doctor now." He closed the Zippo and handed the potion to the incumbent Native American. "Here," he offered, "take this. It should ease your symptoms."

"What is it?" Longshadow asked.

"A healing potion," Harry supplied. "My friend is good at making them."

The young man looked hopeful. "You think it can help me?"

Harry shrugged. "There's only one way to find out."

"True," the other man agreed, a nearly forgotten smile appearing briefly. He downed the liquid and a look of disbelief appeared on his face. "You were right. The pain is going away."

"Good." Harry returned his smile. "Now, let me make the other call."

"The other call...?" Longshadow wanted to know but Harry already took out his Zippo again and called for the Doctor.

"Yes?" the mediwitch answered.

"Doctor, I have a task for you," Harry announced, getting straight to the point.

"What is it, Mr. Black? If I can help..." the witch offered.

The wizard smiled at the woman's helpful nature. "I trust that you can. Let me fill you in..."

After relaying the facts as accurately as he could, he realized there was silence on the other side of fire.

"Doctor?" the wizard prompted.

"Yes, I heard you, Mr. Black," the mediwitch confirmed her presence. "The only problem I see is that I'll need something to do the work of the muggle hi-tech equipment you mentioned, but I'm sure that I can get the Professor to solve that difficulty. Other than that... can you get me a DNA sample from the patient? A hair would be acceptable."

Harry pointedly looked at Longshadow, who in turn gave him two hairs he rolled in his fingers.

"On the way," Harry announced before pushing the two hairs through the enchanted flame. "Is there anything else you need?"

"No," the woman declined, "just give me a little time to work on a solution."

"Thanks, Doctor," the wizard replied gratefully.

"No problem, Mr. Black," the woman responded kindly. "Now, if you'll excuse me, I'd like to get started right away. Bye!" The flame flickered and disappeared.

Longshadow looked at the Zippo in astonishment. "I must say that's impressive," the genetically engineered metahuman admitted. "Don't you think that a cell phone would be more inconspicuous, though?"

Harry smiled. "If you knew my friend who made them, you'd know that it's a wonder that it's as inconspicuous as it is."

"I see," Longshadow accepted with a smile, but then his face slowly grew grim.

The wizard looked him over carefully. "What is it?"

"I just realized how much I miss everything," the sick figure explained. "That was the first moment of relative normalcy I've had in a long while. There are so many things that I wish I could do just once more before I... well."

Harry looked at the other man curiously. "For example?"

"Like walking in the woods," the ex-Ultiman supplied. "I've already started to forget the sound of the wind racing through the trees."

The mage thought over his companion's comment for a moment. "Well, I should be able to fulfill that request, at least," he announced. "Can you stand?"

"Yes, but I won't be able to walk far," Longshadow warned.

Harry smiled gently. "You won't have to. Now, hold on." Harry Apparated them both to a woody area and watched as the light reappeared in Longshadow's eyes.

"Incredible," he heard the young man whisper. "I've missed it for so long..."

"Do you feel strong enough to walk a few steps?" Harry asked. "You could use me as a support if you like."

Longshadow smiled in reply and they walked for a few moments but, all too soon, the Indian boy grew weary and Harry transported them back to the young man's apartment aboard the Watchtower.

"Thank you, Mr. Black," the Native American said gratefully. "It will be easier for me to go now."

Harry raised an eyebrow. "Go? Now you're just being pessimistic. I'm positive that the Doctor will find a cure for you soon. Just hold on for a bit longer."

"I don't think that 'soon' will be 'soon enough'," the worn figure admitted quietly. "I can feel it coming even now... and today, when I went to the med bay... They knew it as well as I did. They didn't say anything, but I could see it written on their faces. They weren't expecting me to live until tomorrow's visit."

"Don't give up now," Harry urged. "If you can only hold in there for a few moments longer..."

Longshadow momentarily grimaced. "I don't think I can, Mr. Black," he admitted. "I'm tired - very tired - of holding onto life. I can feel my end approaching... I've felt it for some time now, and I've grown used to the idea. I don't know what it will mean for me, but in any case... I have more things to look forward to there than I have holding me here."

"That can change," Harry pleaded. "The Doctor will contact me soon, and we'll get you on your feet again..." Somehow, it didn't sound as reassuring spoken aloud as it did in his head.

"Thank you but..." Longshadow closed his eyes for a moment. "I don't think... I have that long. It's getting harder to breathe as we speak..." The Native American paused for a moment. "It may sound strange... but I feel that all I need to do is just let go... I think I will. Thank you, Mr. Black... for giving me a few memories to take with me... Please tell everybody goodbye for me..."

A smile appeared on his face and, as Harry watched helplessly, the light slowly left Longshadow's eyes, giving place to emptiness.

Harry released the young man's hand, not even aware of when he began holding it in the first place. He took a deep, preparatory breath and thumbed his Zippo.

"Doctor?" Harry called in as calm a voice as he could. "You don't need to hurry with that project anymore. The problem just became academic."

The woman gasped. "Mr. Black? You don't mean to say that...?"

"I'm afraid so," the wizard answered dully.

"Oh, dear," the witch exclaimed. "Another three hours and I could have at least halted the degradation, if not completely repaired it. I'm sorry that I wasn't faster."

"Don't blame yourself, Doctor. I know you did your best," Harry reassured the distraught medic. "If you'll excuse me, I still have to inform his friends."

The Doctor sniffed again. "All right, Mr. Black, just don't try to bottle that inside. It's not good for you," she warned.

"I won't," Harry promised. "Bye, Doctor."

"Bye, Mr. Black," the witch called quietly.

The call disconnected in a flicker of flame. With another deep breath, Harry went to the door, set on informing the other Leaguers as soon as possible. This meeting occurred sooner than he expected, however, when he met face-to-face with Superman, Green Lantern, and Hawkgirl.

Superman spoke first. "Mr. Black? We just received the news from our doctors that Longshadow was practically in an agonal state..." A look of realization appeared on his face. "Is he... has he already..." Clark kept tripping over his tongue. After all, how does one go about asking Death if he just collected one of your friends.

Despite the Kryptonian's sudden speech impediment, Harry understood the gist of his question. "Yes, he died just a few minutes ago."

"Oh," Clark lowered his gaze. "We were hoping to at least be with him when the time came." He sighed. "He shouldn't have to die that young."

Now it was Harry's chance to look away

"No, he shouldn't have," the wizard agreed, "and I'll be discussing that with the surviving Cadmus staff soon. I suppose that it should make me feel better, knowing that I at least took away his pain... but it doesn't. It never does, really."

He shook his head sadly. "Excuse me," he whispered and Disapparated to his room. Perhaps it was a touch cowardly, but he just could not stand the thought of discussing the death of someone with whom he had just spoken.

Bruce was confused.

This did not occur often and, when it did, his curiosity caused him to pursue it almost to the exclusion of all else. Even in the midst of a battle for his life, some part of his brain would be working on the problem. This latest puzzle was of extreme interest.

Having obtained the blood sample and inviting Diana to follow him to his private headquarters, Bruce started examining Mr. Black's blood for any types of reactions. To do proper testing, Bruce divided the sample into several vials and began the experiments with the simple expedient of using a centrifuge to separate the layers. Explaining the process to the curious Amazon as he went, the detective tested each of the layers individually.

The plasma turned out to be the most poisonous, although he discovered an unidentifiable factor counteracting the worst of it. In relation to the plasma layer, both the red and white blood cells seemed almost... ordinary.

With the baseline established, Batman then exposed the blood sample to some of the League's coffee and monitored the solution for changes. As far as he could determine, the plasma had absolutely no reaction to the coffee whatsoever.

The red and white blood cells, on the other hand, were almost parasitic in their efforts to get to the brown liquid. Once the blood cells absorbed the coffee, the entire solution turned clear. When tested, Bruce found the compound to have tremendous potential energy.

Explaining the reaction to Diana, he then attempted to introduce other beverages, theorizing that perhaps caffeine was the answer. The duo examined many soft drinks and teas, but no noticeable reaction occurred.

Diana, whose mind was still on Morgan le Fay's exposed vampiric nature, suggested introducing another blood sample. Bruce acquiesced and donated the appropriate amount. After watching the ensuing reaction under the power electron microscope, neither of the League members was eager to repeat the experiment that put some of the best selling horror films of all time to shame.

Ultimately, the two were at a loss to explain the extreme reactions, which was more than a slight annoyance to the World's Greatest Detective. On the bright side, however, Bruce believed that they might have accidentally discovered the mythical panacea. It would require additional experiments to be certain, but the energized liquid could very well be a large boon to all humankind.

Of course, those thoughts led to speculation as to why Death would allow access to the very thing that would prevent mortals from coming to his hands prematurely.

Needless to say, it boggled the mind.

Harry appeared in his room and soon realized that Doctor was right; he needed to discuss recent events with someone. He sighed and took out his Zippo.

"Henchgirl?" he called.

The typically bubbly inventor instantly answered, "Mr. Black! What can I do for you?"

"I just needed to vent for a moment, and you're one of the few people I can trust," Harry admitted after a moment of thought. "Do you have a few minutes?"

"Of course!" Henchgirl replied seriously. "So, are you ready to tell me why you needed that Pain Killing Potion?"

Harry grunted in agreement before verbally confirming, "Yes, as it happens I do wish to discuss that topic. I have to warn you, however, the story may be longer than you expect."

"I'm all ears," the witch replied invitingly.

Harry sighed again and started relaying the entire story to his friend.

"...And after I informed them what happened, I Apparated back to my room and Floo'd you," he concluded after several minutes.

"Oh, I'm sorry, Mr. Black. I really am." Henchgirl was silent for a moment before adding, "I'm not as good at offering a supporting arm over a Floo call, am I?"

"It's alright, Henchgirl," Harry reassured the woman. "Just you listening to me helped a lot."

"I just wished that I could do more," the Potions' mistress professed. "No one should have to suffer witnessing an innocent die all alone. Which reminds me," she added, "the Alchemist invited his friend - and former student, I believe - to the Island. I thought that he was nice for a few centuries old person. Anyway, his name is Michael Sedigovius, and we were just talking about the differences between Potions and Alchemy when he changed the topic and asked me to give you something. I thought that it was a nice gesture-"

"Henchgirl..." Harry breathed in a warning tone. He was beginning to get a bad feeling about the so-called 'present'. "What exactly did he give me?"

"Oh, just a ring," the witch answered easily.

"A ring?" Harry repeated, feeling more than a little confused. It sounded innocent enough. The ring could not possibly be some nefarious trick like Tom Riddle's diary, and any curses placed directly on the object would be very easy to spot. Honestly, what harm could one ring do?

"Yep," she repeated. "He got it from one of his friends called - if I remember right - Policarpus. Old Poli, who was a master necromancer, is most famous for having the last recorded conversation with Death personified."

Harry rolled his eyes. 'Of course,' Harry grumbled to himself. 'Why would Fate allow an ordinary ring to find him when there was a Master Necromancer's ring available?'

"So I have a piece of jewelry from a dead master of Necromancy, then?" Harry asked resignedly.

"Well, you never can really tell with that sort if they're actually dead or not," Henchgirl commented. "You can relax, though. Michael said that this ring actually belonged to Death."

Harry blinked. "And you think that this scenario is better than inheriting stuff from a necromancer?" he demanded incredulously. "Why would Death give anybody a ring, anyway?"

"Supposedly, it was given to Policarpus during that conversation I mentioned. Anyway, Michael claims that it was intended to grant Policarpus a better understanding of the matters of life and death. The only problem was, he could never wear it. It apparently burnt him every single time he tried. So, he went around trying to find someone who could wear it, but failed every time. Eventually, Policarpus gave it to Michael and told him to present it to someone who can make some use of it."

The wizard rubbed his temples tiredly. "So you're saying..."

"That Michael figured if anybody could wear the ring, you could," Henggirl confirmed. "Of course, the fact that he suspected it belonged to you in the first place might have played some role here as well..."

"Great," Harry groaned. "Just lovely."

Apparently, Henggirl was too excited to notice his sarcasm. "Yes it is, Mr. Black. I can't wait to see what it does! I'm sending it through... now!"

True to her word, a silver ring with an onyx eye shot out of the fire a second later, and Harry caught it purely on instinct. Oddly enough, the ring felt both warm and chilly at the same time, though he was at a loss as to the reason why.

"Did you get it, Mr. Black?" the witch called.

"Yeah, I did," Harry confirmed as he turned the article over in hand and continued his study.

"So, put it on, already!" she bubbled.

Harry, apparently, was to be the voice of reason. "Are you sure that's a wise idea, Henggirl?"

"Why not? What's the worst that could happen?" she asked innocently.

Harry decided not to dwell on the many possible - if not probable - answers to that question. Bracing himself for the worst - not that he had any idea what that could be, he slipped the ring on his finger. The strange hot-and-cold feeling instantly spread over his entire body, leaving him feeling very light-headed. Then, as fast as the feeling came, it was gone and he realized Henchgirl was calling him.

"Mr. Black? Are you all right?" the Potions' Mistress asked frantically.

Harry shook his head before stifling another groan. "I'm many things at the moment, Henchgirl," he admitted. "Not sure if 'all right' is in there, but I'm still in one piece at any rate."

"Oh, good!" she said happily. "So, did it work?"

"I suppose that depends on how you expected it to work," Harry noted as he stared at the apparently inactive ring.

"Well," she deliberated, "do you feel any new and unexplainable knowledge or perhaps even gain a sudden insight in the matters of life and death?"

"I don't think..." He trailed off as his mind was assaulted by a flood of irrational awareness.

Inexplicably, Harry suddenly knew that the role of the incarnation of Death was to preserve the delicate balance between life and death. He was now aware of how the slightest imbalance at either side of the scale could result in far-reaching, potentially catastrophic, consequences. Confused by this sudden burst of knowledge – chiefly, its origin - he concentrated harder to make sense of the stream of consciousness. His efforts were rewarded when he suddenly remembered Death growing tired of his eternal post at some point during the Middle Ages. The incarnation ultimately decided to withdraw from the world of life but, before he could cease to be, he must first appoint his successor.

The wizard found this latest revelation to be extremely worrisome, but pushed that line of consciousness further in a pang of sick curiosity.

Death soon discovered that even locating a suitable candidate was a long and arduous task, and that, even if such an individual were located, he or she would not possess the requisite knowledge to assume his function. Accordingly, while Death searched the globe in vain for a fitting successor with the prerequisite power, capacity, and sense of responsibility, he constructed a simple ring and imbued it with all the information his replacement would need. Finally, he enchanted the unassuming piece of jewelry to seek out the new incarnation upon his... retirement.

Harry groaned audibly, inspiring another fear attack in Henchgirl.

"Is something wrong, Mr. Black?" the witch asked worriedly.

He had no idea how many times she had voiced that question while he was reviewing his newly-gained knowledge, but the wizard ignored his latest problem for a moment in order to reassure his friend.

"Er... no, I wouldn't say wrong, Henchgirl," Death's 'heir apparent' supplied resignedly. "It's just business as usual in the life of the universe's spittoon."

The two friends conversed for a while longer - including a brief mention of Kara's and Galatea's upcoming birthdays - before Harry noticed that the agreed-upon time to validate Zatanna's wards was fast approaching. Ending his trans-dimensional conversation, the wizard Apparated to a point near the enchantress's abode.

Strolling casually up to the two-story cottage, it was the work of a few minutes for Harry's Mage Sight to inspect the entire warding system. Once the examination was complete, Harry retrieved a quill and parchment from the recesses of his coat pocket and sketched out the warding diagrams, noting the very few areas needing improvement. Task accomplished, Harry strode through the anti-Apparation, anti-Portkey, and Intruder alarms to knock upon the female Leaguer's door.

The top hat-wearing mage answered the summons a few moments later, the look of irritation upon her face lessened slightly at Harry's raised eyebrow.

"Did I catch you at a bad time?" the multiverse-traveling mage inquired mildly.

Zatanna violently exhaled. "It's not you, Joe. I was experimenting with a new potion and found that my apothecary sold me an inferior ingredient. I was just on my way to choke the little weasel," she explained.

"I see," Harry replied with a slight nod. "Well, I was just going to deliver my assessment of your wards. You seem to have done an excellent job of casting them; I only found a couple of areas that could stand some improvement." The wizard handed her the parchment. "Would you like me to accompany you to get your refund?"

Zatanna started to decline before a stray thought seemed to change her mind. "I would love for you to, Joe," the witch accepted with a wicked smile. "Would you mind being a bit imposing with him – you know, leave a good impression?"

Harry's answering grin was just as enthusiastic as the shorter brunette. "Certainly, Zee. I've had my own run-ins with irritating shopkeepers from time to time, and I would be happy to help."

"Great!" she chirped. "The store is in the downtown part of town. Can you follow my Apparation?"

Harry replied in the affirmative and the woman disappeared. The wizard transported himself to her location an instant later and found himself standing outside of yet another magical curio shop. Feeling the now-familiar onset of déjà vu, the mage held the door for his female companion and followed her into the dimly lit bazaar.

"Oh, Siiid!" Zatanna called out into the apparently vacant store. "I've got a bone to pick with you about that dud gryphon's claw you sold me."

The pair continued inside the store and Zatanna marched right up to the counter. "You're not fooling me, Sid! I know you're here somewhere!" she admitted.

Harry's sensitive ears noticed a slight shuffling sound coming from the curtained-off area behind the counter. The wizard caught his friend's attention and pointed at the 'Employees Only' area.

The stage performer smiled and twitched her wand, and the curtain parted to reveal a squat, wizened old man. The bald figure was attired in a faded canary yellow sweater and slacks, and was currently squinting at the female magician with a frown.

"What do you want?" he grunted through a grimace.

Zatanna crossed her arms under her chest and huffed. "Don't play coy with me," she ordered. "You know very well that powdered gryphon's claw should be pure white." She tossed a glass container on the counter between them. "This stuff is ivory. What did you put in it, your toenail clippings or something?"

The crotchety old man picked up the vial and squinted some more at it. "Looks like powdered gryphon claw to me," he said unhelpfully. "Maybe you're just not using it right."

The witch's frown deepened. "You know that's a load of bunk," she protested. "I want my money back."

"Sorry, sweetheart," the short little man said smugly, "no refunds."

Zatanna quirked a little smile. "Oh, no?" she asked in an innocent tone. "In that case, could you perhaps explain that to my friend over there?" The enchantress pointed at Harry, who had his arms crossed and was leaning against one of the many overloaded bookcases.

The old merchant blinked owlishly. "Mr. Black?" he questioned in surprise.

"Hello, Sid," Harry replied in a dead tone. "How's the family."

"Uh... they're all just fine, Mr. Black," the shorter figure answered. "Thanks for asking."

Harry dipped his head slightly in acknowledgement. "Glad to hear it," the wizard intoned. "Now, about that refund..."

"She's a friend of yours?" Sid the shopkeeper queried nervously.

The dimension-hopping wizard gave another minute nod.

"O-of course!" the bald man agreed hastily. "Let's see," he muttered, "Gryphon's going for about five silver fens an ounce-"

"Five?" Zatanna erupted. "I paid twelve fens an ounce only three days ago!"

An inexplicable drop in room temperature suddenly accompanied Harry's growing glare.

"Twelve! I meant twelve fens an ounce!" he said hurriedly, sighing in relief as the room warmed up again and Harry uncrossed his arms. The little man quickly dug a coin purse out of his slack's pocket and counted the money out into a smug Zatanna's outstretched hand.

"A pleasure doing business with you, Sid," she added sarcastically.

The store's owner just grumbled before turning his attention to the room's other occupant. "I'm glad you dropped by, Mr. Black," Sid announced. "I urgently need to speak with you." At Zatanna's curious look, he pointedly added, "Alone."

Harry opened his mouth and made to refuse the other man, but was interrupted.

"Please! It's important!" the diminutive shopkeeper insisted. "We're talking serious evil important!"

The black-clad wizard sighed before reluctantly nodding.

"Thank you!" the short man accepted before heading to the back of his shop.

"I'll wait out here," Zatanna confirmed, earning another nod from Harry as he passed her and vaulted over the counter in pursuit of their host.

Harry followed the other man to yet another dusty bookcase. "Well?" he prompted when the older man failed to acknowledge his

presence. "You said that you needed to tell me something? I'm listening."

"Yeah, I just needed to get – ah, here it is!" the man announced. He pulled an old tome off the shelf and turned to Harry. "My sense of foresight isn't the most advanced of my family," he admitted calmly, "but lately, I've been picking up an approaching darkness. Something big's headed this way from the Pits, and it means business. I mean, 'the world's gonna end at lunchtime' business."

The taller wizard's eyes narrowed. "What is this darkness?" he demanded. "What's its name?"

"I don't get much in the way of details," Sid replied apologetically. "All I know is that it's some sort of major league demon, it's going to enter this world and consume it if it's not stopped, and it requires a sacrifice to open the portal to its prison."

"That's it?" Harry protested. "There's always some demon trying to get back to Earth - that's all most of them ever think about! How can we do anything to help with information that vague?"

"Not we," Sid clarified. "You. I don't know why, but the lingering blood protection from your mother's sacrifice will be crucial to victory."

"And that's all you know?" the wizard asked incredulously. "You can't tell me anything else?"

The man handed Harry the old volume. "I've got a feeling that you should read that book," he advised, "cover to cover, and I mean right here and now. There's something in there that you'll need to know, but I have no idea what it could be – and that really is everything I got."

"Blood and Rituals: a Compendium?" he read aloud.

The shopkeeper shrugged.

The taller mage closed his eyes tiredly. "All right," he said finally, "I understand that you'd tell me more if you could."

The squat man smiled sadly. "Sorry, kid, but them's the breaks. If it helps any, I know that you'll do the right thing," Sid offered. "Now, do your time thing and read that book."

Harry nodded as the man turned to leave and thumbed the remote's pause switch. He made his way over to the worn adjacent chair, sank into its old cushions, and began to read.

Bruce leaned back in his computer chair and observed Diana as she awkwardly adjusted one of the many high-powered microscopes scattered around the Batcave. Even though she had even less understanding of the human genome than she did of the concept of a 'tactical retreat', the Amazon was still adamantly pursuing their goal despite any shortcomings she might possess.

'A good synopsis of her character in general,' the Dark Knight realized. Nodding to himself as he finally reached a decision, he pulled off his cowl and spoke, "Diana?"

"What, Bruce?" she asked distractedly as she attempted to document some change in the sample being studied.

The World's Greatest Detective charged forward into unexplored territory. "I've... been doing some thinking," he admitted.

Wonder Woman grunted something unintelligible.

"About what Etrigan said to me last night," Bruce continued.

The woman's motions stilled completely.

Deciding on a course of action, he asked, "Do you remember the reasons I told you just before the Circe affair?"

Diana turned to face him intently. "The reasons why we shouldn't date?" she unnecessarily expounded. "Those reasons?"

Bruce nodded.

"Well, let's see," she replied as she leaned back against the laboratory table and crossed her arms under her chest. "I believe that you mentioned something about negatively impacting team dynamics, for one. Then, there was a comment about my immortality

and you having issues. Oh, and your rogues' gallery might try to take me on to get at you. Did I miss anything?" the Amazon demanded mockingly.

The unmasked Batman's eyes narrowed momentarily at her derisive tone. "No, you seem to have recalled them perfectly."

"What's your point, Bruce?" Diana asked, suddenly feeling tired at their constant game of cat-and-mouse.

"As I said, I've been thinking," the Wayne scion mentioned, "and I've decided that your immortality might not be as insurmountable an obstacle as I originally thought."

Diana rolled her eyes. "I believe that I've told you that before – repeatedly," she shot back, "not to mention all the close calls I've had since joining the League. For Hera's sake, I would have died in the Fortress of Solitude if you hadn't freed Kal from the Black Mercy."

"I know," he finally acknowledged, "I was there. It's just... somehow, I was convinced that being immortal meant that you couldn't die."

"Even gods can die, Bruce," the Amazon Princess pointed out, "it just takes a lot of effort. I may be ageless, but there is any number of ways for me to be destroyed."

"Yes, I realize that now," he answered quietly, but her enhanced hearing still caught the muffled comment.

Meeting his eyes intently, Diana asked, "Really? What changed, Bruce?"

"Pamela Isley wanted to speak with Mr. Black," Bruce began to explain in short sentences. "After the party last night, I delivered the invitation to him. We talked on the flight back to Gotham. He... gave me several facts to consider."

"Oh?" she inquired softly as she approached him. "Like what?"

He did not reply with words; instead, he reached out and caught her hand, pulling her unresisting figure up against his suddenly standing

frame. Bruce stroked her cheek with his other hand before leaning closer and grazing her lips with his own.

"I thought you said that I'd interfere with the mission," the Amazon whispered as they separated a scant few inches apart and stared into the other's eyes.

"That," he replied even as he began drawing her closer again, "might not be such a bad thing."

A persistent alert caused the pair to separate again. The alarm drew their attention to the central Batcomputer, which was receiving an incoming call.

Diana groaned slightly before muttering, "Don't you have Bat-voicemail or something?"

"I already told the computer to ignore everything short of a Level One emergency," Bruce replied with equal disappointment, before donning his cowl and keying the telecommunications panel to accept the call. "Robin," he acknowledged gruffly.

"Batman, there's a – is that Wonder Woman in the Batcave with you?" the youthful detective blurted.

The cowl's lenses seemed to narrow. "We are in the middle of... resolving an issue. What is it?" the older man demanded shortly.

"Right, well," the second Boy Wonder hesitated, "it's a long story, but the short version is that the world's gonna end – soon."

"Details!" his mentor barked.

The younger crime fighter seemed to gather himself. "You know about Raven, right?" he questioned.

"Your mystic," Bruce supplied impatiently. "Continue."

"Yeah, well, it turns out that her father is Trigon," Robin said bluntly.

Bruce's eyes involuntary widened, and Diana gave a slight start. That was a very well known name.

"It's Raven's birthday today, and dear old dad raised Slade from the dead to deliver his own personal greeting," Robin continued. "Slade's got powers now, and we've spent all morning fighting him. Anyway, Raven just 'fessed up and told us that she's not just a person, but a portal – which Trigon is gonna use to come to Earth real soon. Raven's got these weird markings all over her body to prove it, and they glow whenever she's in the dark or around Slade."

"Any idea what Trigon wants?" Diana asked.

"Undisputed control over every planet in the universe - starting with ours, apparently," the teenager answered wryly. "Raven tried to get help from Azarath, but Trigon has already destroyed it. She said that there's a prophecy that kicked in today, and Raven's now convinced that there's no hope."

Bruce thought back to his conversation with his passenger last night. "There's always hope," he told his latest apprentice aloud.

Robin seemed unconvinced. "Raven seems resigned now, says it's predestined..."

"I have it on the highest authority that there is no set destiny," Batman asserted. "We have the power to make our own futures."

Robin smiled slightly at the older man's attempts to reassure him. "Well, unless you've got a professional demon hunter on the payroll that wouldn't mind taking down a mega-evil demon lord and his army, the future's lookin' pretty bleak."

In that instant, Bruce finally realized the elusive answer to the question he posed to Clark and Diana after the Nanga Parbat debrief. He had asked why Sri Krishna - or Gabriel, or Death, or whatever he was this week - chose now to visit Earth. Somehow, Black knew that Trigon was attempting to break free, and had come down to Earth to stop him.

"Stay put in Titan's Tower," Batman ordered. "We'll get the experts and rendezvous at your location." He started to cut the transmission before he reminded himself of his pledge to be a little more human where his family was involved. "Tell your friend that it's not over yet. We've got a high-level trump card of our own to play."

The leader of the Titans smiled back in gratitude. "Thanks. Robin out." The screen went blank.

"Trigon?" Diana murmured uneasily. "His cruelty is legendary, even among my people. If his hosts break free--"

Bruce laid a comforting hand on her arm. "They won't!" he interrupted. "We're going to stop them. We just need a little help."

He keyed the communications panel for Zatanna, Dr. Fate, and Mr. Black. Broadcasting to all three, he uttered, "This is Batman. We have a situation."

Harry had just finished the rituals text and reverted to normal time when his new communicator went off with an annoying squawk.

"This is Batman," the electronic device broadcasted. "We have a situation."

The slightly ominous feeling that he had been sensing all day increased significantly. 'Oh, great!' Harry groaned to himself before stuffing the book in his coat and rejoining the other two people in the storefront.

Zatanna touched her own electronic ear bud. "Zatanna and Mr. Black reading loud and clear, Batman."

"I, too, am receiving your transmission, my friend," Dr. Fate acknowledged. "What is the nature of this situation?"

"Magic," the digitized voice answered shortly. "What do you know about Trigon?"

"Trigon the Terrible is also known as Scath," Dr. Fate supplied. "He is considered to be pure evil. A prophecy issued some sixteen years ago states that a gem would appear upon the Earth with the power to open a portal to his prison and bring about the end of the world. During this apocalypse, Trigon will first conquer our world before spreading his chaos over the entire universe."

"That fits with our information," the Gotham detective responded after a few moments' thought. "The gem has been found," he added after another laden pause.

"Then it must be destroyed immediately!" Dr. Fate replied without pause. "The prophecy must not be allowed to come to fruition!"

"There is a complication," Bruce replied. "The gem is one of Robin's friends, a sixteen year old girl who was sired by Trigon and a human mystic."

"I am sorry," the helmed magician offered after a moment, "but the girl must be sacrificed to prevent Chaos from being unleashed upon us all!"

"You must have that golden bucket on too tight, Mate," Harry interjected coldly. "The girl is innocent in this affair, and I will not allow you – any of you - to harm her."

"We have no choice!" Dr. Fate maintained. "The miasma of Chaos flows through her very veins! We cannot simply exorcize the demoniac essence from her system, because it is her system. There is simply no way to break the hold that her Immortal father's blood has upon her."

The other magician's comments resonated against some of the knowledge he had just acquired from Sid's book, as well as the memory of his fight with Quirrell and the result of his mother's blood protection so many years ago. "What if we introduced another source of blood - one whose properties destroys evil on contact – in a ritual to offset her heritage?"

The connection was silent for a few moments. "If the donation was made freely by another Immortal of sufficient strength, then it might be possible to separate Trigon's powers from the girl. Then the taint could be destroyed... but where would we find an Immortal with blood that powerful that would willingly pit himself against Trigon and his hellish hosts?"

"You're talking to him," Harry replied grimly. "Gather the materials that you'll need for the exorcism. You know where the club Bewitched in San Francisco used to be?"

"I do," the helmed magician replied affirmatively.

"I own it now," Harry answered. "There's a warded area in the cellar that the previous owner set aside for rituals such as these. I'll get everything else together and meet you there."

"Until then," the magician replied and disconnected.

"Since Robin is involved, are you going to be present?" Harry asked.

"Of course," the masked man replied. "The transporters are online, so I will-"

The two listening mages overheard a noise sounding suspiciously like a meta-powered elbow meeting a Kevlar-armored side. The Dark Knight then revised, "Diana and I will collect the Titans and meet you at this club. Batman out."

Harry and Zatanna looked at each other for several moments before the enchantress broke the silence. "Who'd have thought he had it in him?" she wondered out loud.

The wizard hastily hid a smile before retrieving his Zippo. "Doctor, Henchgirl, I need some medical advice, stat."

"What's the problem, Mr. Black?" the mediwitch replied moments later.

"Are you hurt?" Henchgirl asked at the same time.

"I am well," Harry assured the two witches. "There's a young girl who isn't, however. She's apparently destined to serve as a portal for her demon father, who is coincidentally trying to break into this dimension. We need to break the hold that his blood and magic has on her."

There was a momentary pause before the Doctor responded, "Alright. What can we do to help?"

"Well," Harry hesitated, "my blood destroys evil on contact. Raven is neither evil nor entirely a demon; will she be harmed if I infused her with my own blood?"

"That's a toughie," Henchgirl commented unnecessarily. "Since she's a part-demon, she is theoretically strong enough to accept an

undiluted donation; as you know, a completely human patient would need an additional intermediary compound to lessen the trauma – like Kara's DNA, for example."

"Yes, the girl shouldn't need that," the Doctor agreed, "but just injecting a few ounces of your blood won't do the trick in this case. Since this demon is her father, you will have to break that tie as well. That means-"

"I know what it means," the wizard interrupted. "I'm going to be a father."

The two women were silent for a few moments as the revelation settled. "I'm sorry, Mr. Black," the physician finally acknowledged, "but I believe that you are correct."

When the alternative was standing idly by, allowing a master demon to escape his imprisonment, and potentially condoning an innocent girl's damnation... well, there really was no choice to deliberate.

"I was thinking of performing the R'uustai," Harry finally admitted.

"The Klingon adoption ritual?" the two women chorused.

"Yep," the mage confirmed. "Granted, I'll be claiming a daughter, not a brother, but it should still work. Don't you agree?"

They considered the question for a few moments. "I suppose it would," the Doctor finally established.

"We'll pull a few things together for her on our end, Mr. Black," Hengchgirl promised. "You said that her name is Raven?"

"That's right," Harry confirmed. "Thanks a lot, ladies."

"Anytime," the Doctor responded graciously before the two witches disconnected.

The wizard released another sigh and turned back to his two member audience. "Well, Sid, you wouldn't happen to have the candles for a R'uustai ritual by any chance, would you?" Harry asked.

"I'm not entirely sure," the other man hesitated. "A few weeks ago, I started gathering some candles and other unusual ingredients – wasn't completely sure why. I also had a sudden inclination to carve a strange set of runes on the candles themselves." The short merchant paused for a moment before pulling a small tray out from behind the counter and admitting, "I can't decipher what the symbols mean, though, so you might want to double-check these to see if they'll work for this ritual of yours. I have my notes here for you to go over, as well. While you give these a look-see, I'll go dig the rest of my candle stock out of the back – just in case."

"Thanks," Harry called to the retreating shopkeeper.

Within a few minutes, Harry had selected all the materials for his desperate alternative to Dr. Fate's strategy. Bagging the ingredients, the wizard fished out a small sack of Galleons from his coat pocket. He tossed it on the counter and said, "These components should do nicely, Sid. Keep the change, with my compliments."

The shopkeeper bounced the bag in one hand without even looking at the contents. "You are too kind," Sid commented. "Good luck."

"Thanks," Harry muttered as he swept his purchases into a pocket and turned back to Zatanna. "Well, shall I escort you home?"

"Are you kidding?" the witch exclaimed. "If the end of the world is coming, I'm gonna be right there with you, trying to get rid of that demonic portal spirit thing."

Harry sighed. "Well, it was worth a shot. All right, then. If you're that anxious to get in the line of fire, then let's get going."

The next hour was hectic as a multitude of people rushed to the new Leaky Cauldron and began making preparations. Once Batman and Wonder Woman arrived with the Teen Titans, Harry and Dr. Fate explained their plan for the extraction and destruction of the demonic energies threatening Raven.

Harry expected some sort of reaction from the blue-cloaked girl upon learning of the residual magical and physical consequences of his plan to break Trigon's hold on her, but she seemed completely detached, bordering on apathetic. In fact, Harry believed the young

half-demon had already accepted defeat and no longer even entertained the notion of succeeding in their rash plan.

Once Raven had verbally confirmed her acceptance, the two male magicians took turns instructing her in the proper steps and incantations. With no other voiced objections, Dr. Fate readied himself to exorcise the portal's energy once Harry's efforts had dislodged Trigon's grip. Once the two wizards succeeded, Zatanna stood by with a prepared ritual circle to trap the soon-to-be-expulsed taint.

With another set of nods from the human magicians, Harry and Raven began reciting the short incantation while each lit their ritual candles. Once the two ignited all eight and cast the requisite spells, they slashed their right palms – Raven with a small ceremonial dagger and Harry with a Cutting Hex – and joined hands, mixing not only their blood but also their magic.

There seemed to be no affect for several moments and Harry feared that the shopkeeper's book had led them awry. His private ruminations were soon interrupted, however, by a sharp burning sensation in the wound in his hand. His scar began aching as it did during Voldemort's reign, the two injuries pulsing in tandem. Harry utilized his Occlumency training and shunted the pain away; Raven, it seemed, was not quite as lucky as beads of sweat began rolling down her now-grimacing face.

"Is it working?" Raven asked heavily.

An apparently sourceless voice responded in the young witch's mind, a transmission that Harry somehow overheard. 'You know better than to fill your head with such fanciful ideas.'

'You aren't here!' she thought, panicked. 'You can't be!'

The apparent voice of Trigon laughed and replied, 'I am always with you. You are a part of me - forever.'

Reminded of Voldemort's temporary possession in the Department of Mysteries, Harry mentally spat, 'Hardly. Soon, she'll be free and you'll be out a portal!'

The Cauldron's cellar swam out of focus and a cavern supplanted it. Harry found himself standing next to Raven's slight form and drew her close. Realizing what had happened, he leaned down and said, "Remember, Raven, all of this is in your mind. In here, you are in control. You can force him to leave."

"There is no stopping what is about to happen," Trigon's dark voice gloated.

The two mages found themselves standing upon a small hovering slab of rock, which was floating in midair above a sea of flames. Before them on the rocky wall were two pairs of red eyes.

"Of course there is," Harry disagreed in a confident tone. "In fact, you've already lost; you just haven't figured it out yet."

"I know of your insignificant plans," the incarnation of evil boasted. "You think you have the might to supplant my hold on my daughter and thereby deprive me of my portal."

"Very good," Harry cheered mockingly, "and you figured it out all by yourself, too!"

"You haven't the power!" the demon lord roared. "Raven, this is the reason I sired you. You were born so I could rule the Earth."

Raven wrapped one arm around Harry's waist and faced the four-eyed wall. "What if I don't let you?" she demanded. "What if I don't become the portal?"

"It is not your place to tell me what to do!" Trigon bellowed. The four eyes became a burning sphere that swiftly expanded to fill half the cavern before reappearing within its hideous light.

The demon boasted, "I am the one with all the power! I am the one who decides your destiny! You do not have a choice!"

The wizard drew up every bit of disdain he felt for the creature before him. His voice unwavering, Harry firmly proclaimed, "You shall never possess Raven - I will not allow it!"

Desperately hoping that magic worked in the mindscape, Harry gathered every positive memory he could muster and used those to

fuel his need to defend the girl attached to his side. One quick spell later had a giant silvery stag racing across the void between the two parties. The glowing entity lowered its antlered head and charged into the stone wall.

Trigon bellowed in apparent pain once the stag made contact. The demonic being continued to hiss uncomfortably as if something were burning him inside the sedimentary layer.

"See, Raven?" Harry asked the shorter figure at his side. "He isn't invulnerable in this place. We are in your mind; take control and banish him!"

"I-I can't!" she protested. "My powers come from him. If I give in and use them, he still wins!"

"That's right, Raven," Trigon gloated even though he still sounded plagued by Prong's assault. "You will always be Daddy's Little Girl."

Harry squeezed her comfortingly. "I have also given you my power, Raven," Harry informed the girl. "Together, we can do this. Remember your mother and your friends on Azarath. Remember what Trigon did to them, what he will do to your friends here on Earth if we do not defeat him! Take those memories and push him out."

"You wanted to protect your friends, to keep them from knowing," Trigon tried to distract her, "but you cannot deny the evil within you. You will bring destruction to everything and everyone."

"You are not evil, Raven. He is," Harry immediately countered. "Do not listen to his lies. Concentrate only on your loved ones, and how you feel about them."

Bowing her head, the girl struggled to comply, and Harry added his efforts to hers.

In the physical world, the gathered Leaguers and Titans observed the proceedings uneasily.

"Steady..." Dr. Fate announced to Zatanna as Raven's cloak began turning crimson and her visage began twisting to a monstrosity with

four red eyes. The marks of Scath began glowing on the girl's form with a wicked light.

"Steady," he cautioned again as the demonic Red Raven became increasingly defined and the magical tattoos began writhing.

Just as the essence of Trigon's portal seemed fully formed, Dr. Fate shouted "Now!" and began his own incantations.

The cavern suddenly dissolved, returning the two magicians to the ritual chamber.

As the teenaged girl began crying out in pain and Harry felt his magic being pulled into the girl he was now embracing, the Red Raven spirit slowly rose into the air, leaving a white-cloaked and human-looking Raven seated on the floor. His arms shaking slightly with his expended effort, the helmed sorcerer directed the shrieking specter into the center of the runic circle – which Zatanna promptly closed with chalk.

Once the design upon the floor was completed, the Raven in his arms slipped into peaceful oblivion. The entrapped Raven, however, was not as fortunate and was busy hissing at them.

"Now, to destroy the creature," Dr. Fate announced tiredly.

"Wait, is Raven alright?" an impatient Beast Boy demanded as he rushed forward, accidentally dragging his foot across the circle's boundary.

"Oops..." he squeaked out as the malevolent entity escaped and swarmed towards its former host – and suddenly halted when confronted by the luminescent presence of Caledfwich, held aloft by a very upset and protective wizard. The crimson ghost did an abrupt about-face and dove through the block wall, fleeing the ritual chamber.

Once the specter had made good its escape, several hostile glares were leveled at the short green shape shifter. "Umm... sorry?" he offered in a subdued tone.

Harry forcibly restrained the several rather violent responses he desperately wanted to execute, instead conjuring a simple bed for

his burden and placing the sleeping girl into it. Taking a moment to catch his breath, the wizard gave the unconscious witch one last look before Summoning his coat and hat from their place on the wall.

"Wait, friend Black!" Starfire called from her position among the magically disinclined. "Where are you going?"

"Hunting," Harry answered shortly before Disapparating outside and following the spirit's trail with Mage Sight.

"Great!" Zatanna huffed. "What now?"

"The demon could be attempting to lure us away in order to return to claim the girl again," Dr. Fate theorized.

"No," Robin disagreed, "I don't think so. We followed Slade to an abandoned library on the outskirts of Jump City. It was set up with a weird looking temple. There was a giant statue of Raven there, and those marks on her body flared whenever she got close to the place. That may be where the portal is supposed to be opened."

"If it is on a Ley line, you may be correct," the sorcerer admitted after a moment of thought. "Let a small number of us remain here to guard the child; the rest of us may journey to this site and prevent the portal from opening."

As if to disagree, the building shuddered and the ward nodes began lighting up around the room.

"What's going on?" Batman demanded.

"Those are the wards!" Zatanna shouted in dismay. "We're under attack." She cast a scrying spell on the wall and focused on the club's exterior. As they watched, an army of flame demons gathered around the building and laid siege. Behind the infernal forces, arms held casually behind his back, was-

"Slade!" Robin growled.

"And he brought friends," Cyborg noted tightly as he activated his sonic cannon. "A lot of friends."

"Be careful!" Robin called as the gathered heroes moved towards the exit. "We've faced these guys before; conventional attacks don't work on them."

"Terrific," his mentor commented as he palmed several carbon dioxide pellets.

"Very well, Lady Zatanna and I shall supplement your efforts to dispatch these creatures," Dr. Fate decided.

"But what about friend Black?" the Tamaranian inquired worriedly.

"Mr. Black is a formidable opponent," Dr. Fate replied. "I am sure that he will be alright for the moment. Your need for assistance is greater just now."

"Wait," Beast Boy spoke up, "can't one of you just teleport out and bring him back here to help with these fire dudes?" he asked desperately.

"Unfortunately, that is no longer possible," the sorcerer announced. "Our adversaries have just blockaded the wards against our escape. If we wish to leave, we must fight our way free. Besides, our friend's mission is even more important than our own; if Trigon breaks free, the results of this battle will be meaningless in the chaos to come."

"Alright," Batman brought the discussion to a close, "here's how we're going to do this. Wonder Woman, you take Starfire and Beast Boy; go out there and create some fire breaks. We want to contain the damage if at all possible. Cyborg, you guard Zatanna as she attacks from the roof. Robin, you and I will guard Dr. Fate as he works from down here, and neutralize Slade if possible. I've put a call into the Watchtower for reinforcements; their ETA is fifteen minutes."

"You two, come with me," Diana demanded before taking flight and bursting through the roof of the building. The other two flight-capable metahumans followed through the hole as Zatanna and Cyborg headed towards the stairs.

"Let us hope that we can remain in control for that long," Dr. Fate intoned as he began firing spells through the front windows.

"Indeed," Batman agreed, several fire-suppression pellets joining the magical salvo.

The demonic echo of Raven had made excellent use of its few moments' head start, for Harry could find no sign of the entity save a faint trail of magic in its wake. Once the specter had escaped the club's new wards, it apparently headed straight for the Titan's Jump City, some miles northeast of San Francisco. The wizard took to the air while maintaining his Mage Sight on the elusive path.

The trail eventually led the mage to a dilapidated library on the outskirts of the city proper. As if to confirm his successful tracking, Trigon's mark glowed an angry red above the door. Harry followed the trail further, eventually leading him a wide circular shaft descending into the bedrock. Ignoring the spiral staircase snaking down the wall, he opted instead to fly out into the void and follow the magic residue down a few hundred feet to an adjacent passage.

As he ran down this damp corridor, Harry could just barely hear voices coming from the far end. Smiling darkly, he muttered, "I have you now."

Of course, the demonic entity known to some as Murphy then made his contribution as waves upon waves of fiery wraiths seeped out from every surface and headed straight for him.

Stifling a groan, he growled, "I really don't have time for this!" Several Aguamenti charms discouraged his ardent pursuers, leaving the – if possible – even more irritated wizard to fly over the resultant sludge. Even over the rush of displaced air as he sped down the stone passageway, Harry could still hear the strident, echoed tones of his quarry up ahead of him.

"It is time. The prophecy shall be fulfilled," the odd female voice announced.

Harry mentally cursed and doubled his efforts.

Again, he heard the female voice, only this time speaking solemnly. "The gem was born of evil's fire. The gem shall be his portal. He comes to claim. He comes to sire. The end of all things mortal."

The wizard burst in to a spacious chamber dominated by a stone hand pillar. Several more of Trigon's fiery minions were arrayed around the column, observing the spectacle upon the rock palm. Harry arrived just in time to bear witness to the Red Raven's dissolution into three orbiting series of glowing red runes.

Before he could react, the upper and lower circles of runes slid into the middle, and the whole thing shrunk down to a single point. The conglomeration promptly exploded into a swirling disc of unholy radiation with flames at its rim, forcing Harry to shield his eyes from the unbearable glare.

He promptly shielded the rest of himself once the disk of awful light began spreading out across the floor. Streaks of red and orange flame swirled like the devil's own peppermint candy, and the whole lot started to go red and black.

He watched, Impressed at the display despite himself, as a black silhouette begins to emerge from the blinding white heart of the maelstrom. The antlers and four red eyes instantly marked it as Trigon, even before he saw any other features. Within moments, Raven's father stood up straight, breaking through the stone ceiling. The demon lord was hugely muscled and very distinctive, what with red skin, black stripes, and flowing white hair. Besides the antlers sported atop his head, Trigon wore only a loincloth, steel wristbands, and a broad steel piece over the lower chest that matched his wristbands.

Shaking himself out of his stupor, Harry quickly extinguished Trigon's reinforcements as the giant demon stretched out and roared, "The Earth is mine!" With a large expenditure of magic, the sky darkened to a blood red shade in accompaniment to his claim.

"Well," Harry commented to himself as he flew through the ceiling towards the surface and his new primary objective, "time to go to work."

"We need a new plan!" Diana shouted to Batman as she dumped another load of water on the conflagrant army. After her group had created enough firebreaks to contain the original number of hostiles, she had snatched a water tower from a nearby roof and emptied it

on their enemies. However, even after many trips to the bay for refills, the fiery spirits still kept receiving reinforcements.

The Caped Crusader finished briefing the latest arrivals before Superman and his family, Jason Blood, Red Tornado, Fire, Ice, Green Lantern, Blue Devil, and the Ray headed out and began countering the increasing opposition.

"Agreed," Gotham's original vigilante acknowledged Diana's comment and turned to Dr. Fate, whose attacks seemed to be coming at increasingly greater intervals. "Obviously, extinguishing them isn't working. Is there any way to destroy the ones here before they can regenerate?"

"There might be a way," the helmed magician admitted, "but it would not be effective against this number of enemies."

Supergirl flew in and blew out the phalanx that was attempting to flank the ground troops. "Did someone call Joe? He might have some ideas."

"Black is in pursuit of the portal," Batman responded tersely. "He can't help us right now."

"Great!" Kara grumbled before her mind recalled one of the spells he had attempted to teach Galatea and her on Avalon. "What about that glowing guardian spirit thingy?" she asked Fate. "That Patro... something."

"I know of no such spell," the man supplied.

"Wait, he showed Zatanna, too!" the Argosian blurted before flying to the woman's perch upon the roof. "Hey, Zee, will that silvery ghost Patro-thingy get rid of these guys?"

"A Patronus?" the Enchantress clarified before sending another jet of water towards the advancing center of the flaming army. "It might, but there are hundreds of the things here now. I don't know if Jason and I can handle the volume."

"Maybe I can help," a low voice called from behind them.

The two women and one cyborg turned to find the white-robed Raven standing levelly and seeming alert.

"Raven, are you sure you should be out of bed?" Cyborg demanded.

Zatanna seemed of a similar mind. "You were under a lot of strain earlier. How do you feel?"

The now longhaired girl looked down and clenched one fist. "I feel... great," the witch finally replied. "I can't feel Trigon in my head anymore. What's happening out here?"

"Your green friend accidentally broke our circle and let Trigon's essence escape. Joe's gone after it," the older magician supplied. "Right after that, these guys showed up. We can't figure out where they're all coming from, though, or if this Slade is directing them."

"It's Slade," Raven confidently confirmed. "He was resurrected by Trigon into a soulless existence. He has powers over fire now, and commands Trigon's army. He's after me."

"Slade the Undead, huh?" the African half-human questioned. "Oh, Rob's gonna love that."

"Well, he's not getting you," Kara called out defiantly before a blast of fire from several buildings over caught the girl and slammed her into the club's aerial antenna. The metal structure began falling down on the group and Cyborg moved to cover Zatanna and Raven. The purple-haired girl reflexively threw a hand up at the rapidly descending scrap just before it could hit.

The other two opened their eyes a few moments later, wondering why they had neither heard nor felt the collision, only to stare disbelievingly at Raven's slight form. More specifically, the slight form that was casually holding up a good thousand pounds of scrap metal with one arm.

"Oh-kay," she drawled dryly as she easily shoved the mess away from the group and freed Kara. "I'm guessing that Mr. Black's blood did more than just exorcise Trigon's hold on me."

"Well, whatd'ya know?" Cyborg said jovially as he wrapped one metal-encased arm around the shorter figure. "Rae-rae's got superpowers!"

Raven stared at her hands for a moment before shaking off the shock. "Not now, Cyborg. We've got to stop this mess. Did you see where the blast came from?" she asked.

The computerized teen scanned the area before catching sight of the concealed Slade. "Yeah," he said before powering up his Sonic Cannon, "from Slade." He discharged the white energy and smiled when the master criminal was discharged from his perch.

"Wait a minute," Kara interrupted, "if you've got Joe's powers, you can back up Zee's Patronus, right?"

"I may have his powers," Raven answered, "but I don't have his memories. I don't know how his magic works."

"It's emotionally driven," Zatanna supplied. "In the Patronus's case, you first have to fix a happy memory in your mind. The incantation is 'Expecto Patronum'. Like this." The top hat-wearing woman pointed her wand in front of her and cast the spell as Joe had shown her on Avalon, causing a shining silver rabbit to appear.

"A rabbit?" Cyborg asked while poorly concealing a grin. "That's your great protector?"

"Oh, shut up," Zatanna muttered before addressing her creation. "Go get 'em, Bugs."

The rabbit turned and hopped over the building before chasing down one of the fiery spirits. Bugs attempted to jump on the creature's back but, as soon as the Patronus came in contact, the evil wraith simply ceased to exist. Several of its fellows immediately gave the rabbit a wide berth.

"I take it all back. That's one mean bunny," the mechanical teen praised.

Raven caught the questioning glances. "A happy memory?" she asked hesitantly. At Zatanna's nod, she thought of her friends who were willing to face down Trigon for her. The girl then gathered her

power, idly noticing that the task seemed much easier than before, and cast the spell. Her efforts generated a good-sized cloud of silvery vapor, but no clear form.

"Try a happier memory," Zatanna coached. "How about when you found out that Trigon could be stopped? Remember, this is supposed to call a protector."

Raven recalled the events of the past couple of hours, mainly her introduction to the League's newest mystic. She vividly remembered his steadfast nature, his going so far as to accompany her into her own mind when Trigon contacted her, and the hope that she felt when the kind man who wished to help her had seen the darkness inside her and protected her anyway.

Pooling all of her memories of her savior together, Raven concentrated and incanted, "Expecto Patronum."

The other Titan and two Leaguers paused to stare in shock at the silvery figure that appeared in front of the young witch. The figure paused for a second before stepping off the edge of the building and walking towards the host of fiery wraiths with a look of annoyance on his shining gray face.

Both Leaguer and demon ceased their efforts as the glowing phantom casually walked through the defenders' line, drawing a ghostly scythe as it went. The demons seemed torn between wanting to flee and standing their ground, and their indecision ultimately proved fatal.

Finally reaching the opposition, the silvery figure grabbed the lead wraith and dissolved the creature with one well-placed punch. Smiling evilly, the gray specter rolled up his sleeves and began laying waste to Slade's elemental army with a combination of spell fire, scythe swipes, and martial arts. Bugs the Patronus took to following the Black Patronus, attacking wraiths in its own unique way.

"What the-? Joe is your Patronus?" Kara blurted.

Zatanna looked equally confused. "I thought that Patronii had to be animals," she muttered loudly.

Raven shrugged as a small smile played about her lips. "Well, you said that a Patronus was the representation of all one's positive thoughts projected in the form of a guardian spirit. He was the first protector that came to mind."

"Whoa, look at him go!" Cyborg called out admirably. "Rae-rae, your new dad kicks some serious butt! He took out, like, ten of those flame dudes with one swing of that scythe!"

"My... dad?" the purple-haired girl questioned wonderingly. "Would he really want me?"

"Well, he did go through that ritual to supplant Trigon's hold on you," Zatanna pointed out as she went back to picking off the flame spirits that were now attempting to flee the Patronus team as it was joined by Jason Blood's silvery Doberman. "He apparently left you with some of his power as well as his blood," she added. "Biologically and magically speaking, at least, you are his daughter."

The sky suddenly darkened to a blood red shade, interrupting their conversation as well as the scattered fights.

"What now?" Kara groaned.

"Trigon," Raven bit out with a hint of a growl. "He's here."

The other two teenagers looked around worriedly. "Where's he at?" Cyborg questioned. "I've got nothing."

"Not here," the purple-haired witch informed the group, "in Jump City."

The Argosian looked worried. "We've got to do something!" she exclaimed.

"We stop Slade first, once and for all," Raven interjected. "Then we go to Jump City and face Trigon."

The slim white-cloaked form took to the air as the menacing huntress searched for her quarry.

"Yep," Kara assessed as she took flight to assist, "she's definitely Joe's kid."

"Hey, Tripod!" Harry intentionally shouted the misnomer as he rose into the air to face the towering red behemoth. "I've got a bone to pick with you!"

"Annoying insect!" Trigon roared. "Be gone!" The giant demon sent a wave of magic at the floating wizard, who easily dodged the projectile.

"Well, this is one insect who's gonna swat you!" the magician shot back heatedly as he racked his brain for a feasible solution.

Trigon laughed derisively. "Fighting you is beneath me."

His four eyes glowed red and, in response, Trigon's mark appeared in the air at Harry's feet. Immediately afterward, sparks crackled up from the rune and enveloped the wizard.

Harry felt a burning pain in his chest and looked down – to see a monochrome arm reaching forth from his chest. Another burst of pain and a flash of light resulted in a duplicate of the dimension-hopping wizard, with two noticeable differences. One being the doppelganger's eyes burned bright red, and the other involving the replica's rendering in shades of gray and black.

"That's a nice trick..." Harry mumbled as he took in his monochromatic twin, who was doing likewise. "I always thought I was taller."

Trigon loosed a bellowing laughter. "I may be the source of all darkness," he boasted, "but you are your own worst enemy."

The metaphorical knut dropped for the wizard and he smiled darkly, the other Harry mimicking his action. "Hate to break it to you, Mate," Harry began.

"But I made peace with my own inner demon a long time ago," the colorless Harry finished. The doppelganger looked back to the original wizard. "You know what they say, Bro," the darker Harry mentioned. "The bigger they are..."

"... The more pieces they make!" Harry completed.

Trigon looked dumbfounded at the unexpected turn of events. "What?" he demanded. "That's impossible!"

Both Harrys smirked before replying in unison. "Doing the impossible is our specialty."

The twins wordlessly came to a decision on their tactics before the original Harry drew Caledfwich and charged towards their enemy's heart, sword first. The other wizard Summoned a suspension cable from the nearby bridge and used a few charms and a couple of conjurations to create a gigantic, magically-enhanced garrote.

The first Harry plunged the fiery blade through the demon's thick, armored hide and directly into Trigon's heart. As the giant red figure bellowed in pain, the duplicate wizard tossed one end of the impromptu weapon to the swordsman, and the pair proceeded to wrap the hexed cable around the distracted demon's neck. Nodding grimly to each other, the brothers pulled on the conjured handles with all their combined might.

The self-proclaimed 'source of all darkness' was torn between clawing for the irritation wedged in his cardiovascular pump and fighting against the magically-reinforced Flame Cutting steel wire that was slowly but surely slicing through his throat.

In a matter of moments, the demon finally lost to the double team as his head fell to the ground. Harry could immediately tell the difference as the fiery minions disappeared and the sky returned to its normal hue.

The wizard looked over to his duplicate, who still held the other end of the cable. "I guess this is it," the original Harry commented regrettably. "It was kind of different, having a twin."

"Yeah, well, I don't think the universe could handle two of us, do you?" his opposite inquired.

The first wizard shook his head. "I suppose not," he finally admitted. "So, what happens now?"

The copy shrugged. "Well, I'm a mixture of your magic and Trigon's," he attempted to explain. "I came from you originally, so I guess that

you'll at least reabsorb your magic, and possibly whatever of Trigon's I still hold."

Harry rolled his eyes. "Great," he complained, "that's one more freak component to add to the list."

The gray-scaled version of him nodded in agreement before frowning. "Brace your self," he muttered, "I think Trigon's spell is breaking. Good bye... Brother." His mirror image seemed to compact itself before slamming back into his own chest with another wave of pain.

"Good bye, Brother," the sole remaining wizard uttered to no one.

"Hello, Slade," Raven purred darkly. "Imagine running into you here."

The masked assassin turned from his observation of the attack against the Leaguers and faced the girl. "Hello, Raven," the man greeted levelly. "I'm glad to see that you've finally accepted your destiny as your father's servant. Your delivering yourself into my hands so readily is most convenient."

The purple-haired girl smiled slightly. "Yes, about that... there's been a... change of plans," she commented idly. "I've considered your offer and decided that I'm not going to be Trigon's puppet after all."

"My dear," Slade commented as the two began circling each other, "your desires have nothing to do with the matter. Your father has something very precious to me, but I cannot claim it until I deliver you."

"Trigon may have created me," she growled, eyes flashing white, "but he was never my father!"

Without even a trace of effort, Raven threw out a hand and fired a broad beam of magic directly into Slade's solar plexus, sending him colliding into a building.

The young witch was not finished, however. "Fathers are kind! Fathers protect you! Fathers raise you!" she expounded, each

exclamation accompanied by another blast of energy directed at Slade.

"I have a real father now," Raven professed, "and he's going to destroy your master - just like I'm going to destroy you!"

Slade interrupted her tirade with a fiery bombardment. "I hate to burst your bubble, little girl, but Trigon's power is absolute. There is no way that your friend can-"

The master criminal ceased speaking as the flame surrounding his hands abruptly disappeared. Just as he discovered that he was unable to reignite them, his elemental allies promptly vanished as well. Slade's eyes widened in sudden comprehension as the sky began lightening back to its normal azure hue.

"You were saying?" Raven questioned mockingly.

"I may no longer have any extra powers, Raven, but Trigon was also the source of your magic," he gloated, drawing a bow staff. "You're now powerless as well."

The witch smiled and levitated the man into the air. Raven smiled at his startled expression and dryly asked, "Did I forget to mention that my new father gifted me with his power?"

"No matter," Slade dismissed as he withdrew several throwing discs. "I can still easily dispatch you."

"I think not, Slade Wilson," a cold voice intoned as Harry Apparated onto the debris-littered street, "or would you prefer 'Deathstroke the Terminator'?"

"And who are you?" the criminal demanded.

"Her father," Harry growled before kicking the man in his most vulnerable spot and launching him skyward. The wizard tracked the other man's progress with one hand before sending a Reductor Curse to eliminate the soulless wretch's reanimated remains.

Harry smiled slightly. "Let's see you resurrect yourself now," he challenged in a pleased tone, all the while casually holding a sack in

one hand. Turning his attention back to the slight, white robed figure, he asked, "Are you okay, Raven?"

The girl swallowed hard and nodded. She seemed to debate something with herself before she swept forward and wrapped both arms around his waist, hugging him for all she was worth.

"Thank you... Father," she voiced softly.

"You are quite welcome," Harry answered in like kind, dropping the bag to return her embrace. "If you prefer, though, you can just call me 'Joe'," he offered after hearing her tentative address. "Or 'Black'. I'm not all that picky, really."

"Why did you do it?" she asked. "You could have just killed me; Trigon could never have come here with me dead."

Harry squeezed her comfortingly. "No," he disagreed gently, "I couldn't."

He looked up at the slowly gathering Leaguers and Titans. "Is everyone else okay?" he asked Kara, who could not seem to decide what she wanted to do with him.

"Oh, we're all just fine," she said carefully. "Raven there seems to be able to channel you now. She created one of those Patronus things – which looked just like you, by the way – and it tore most of the fire guys to shreds. When you took out their boss, everything else around here just shut down."

Harry just nodded, happy that she seemed to be taking everything so well.

"We are going to have a little talk about you running off to face incarnations of evil by yourself, though," the Argosian pledged.

Harry winced.

"So, how'd you banish Trigon, anyway?" Jason Blood questioned curiously.

The wizard smirked and nudged the bag with one foot. The other magician took the hint and glimpsed inside the sack. "Nice trophy,"

Blood commented, nodding at the out-of-sight severed head. "How'd you take him down?"

"I must admit that I too am curious as to your victory," Dr. Fate agreed. "If I may inquire, what events transpired after you left us?"

Harry paused for a moment to collect his thoughts. "Well, the wraith that we pulled out of Raven managed to free Tripod before I could catch up to her," the wizard began, "so I challenged good ol' Tricorder to a duel. We exchanged blows for a bit, I distracted him by throwing my pig sticker in his heart, and then finally I created the world's largest garrote. Long story short, Trident ended up a head shorter and I gained a new trophy to hang on my wall," the wizard finished, retrieving the sack from the ground. "Personally, I think that it will look very nice mounted over my mantle."

Explanation complete, the mage took in the surroundings. "It seems like you lot threw a party while I was gone." Harry shook his head at the condition of the Cauldron. "The insurance company would never believe this story," he commented, before casting several Repair Charms to correct the damage to his club.

"Much better!" Harry congratulated himself. Turning to the girl who was still holding onto him, he patted her back and offered, "How about we step inside for a few minutes. I'm sure that you've got some questions, and I could use a drink at this point."

Raven acquiesced and the two magicians carefully stepped around the rubble, the wizard holding the girl in one hand and the bagged trophy in the other.

A/N: Thus concludes Chapter Ten of Terminal Justice, weighing in at a hefty 14,000 words. Thanks in large part to the many well-written omakes that have been submitted, I was inspired to turn out this latest update much faster than is my norm. I hope that you found this latest entry entertaining, and look for the next update to be uploaded soon.

I cleaned out my omake inbox on this chapter, pulling certain aspects from several submissions received over the past few months. Chief among these were Luinlothana's Fading Shadow; Chris Hill's Debating New Ideas, It's in the Blood; and

Rorscharchblot's The Black Patronus. As always, these have been skewed to fit my... unique slant on things.

Many thanks to James for his proofreading this chapter, and to Chris for his background information and suggestions on the various DCverse fixtures.

For those curious individuals who are wondering why I cast Tim Drake as Robin instead of Dick Grayson... I realize that the TT cartoon dropped a couple of hints pointing towards Dick being the animated Robin, but I chose Tim for two reasons. First, the animated TT Robin uses a bo staff – which is more along Tim's equipment line. Second, Speedy was portrayed exactly the same in both the TT and JLU cartoons, suggesting that the events of the animated JLU occur concurrently with the TT episodes. Ultimately, a quote from one of the show's producers - commenting that they intentionally left Robin's identity vague - convinced me to use Tim.

Please feel free to speculate as to what side effects (if any) Harry accrued from reabsorbing his Trigon-generated 'twin'. I have yet to decide if Harry even needs an upgrade, what with his gift from Etrigan still sitting idly. As always, your commentary is most appreciated.

Thank you for your interest, and please remember to review.

Previous Chapter
Terminal Justice

Chapter 10: The Next Generation, Part One
by Overkill

Next Chapter

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Chapter 11: The Next Generation, Part Two

by Overkill

Next Chapter

Disclaimer: This is a cross between JLA (Season 5) and Rorschach's Blot's Make A Wish Story. Harry Potter is owned by JK Rowling and various publishers. Henghirl, The Professor, and other such objects are Rorschach's creation. DC Comics own the Justice League and associated characters/plot devices. The lack of plot, however, can be attributed to me.

The Next Generation, Part Two

"This stinks, Brainy!" Chuck Thane complained. "I hate running from a fight!"

If he actually possessed the human's range of emotions, Querl Dox would have rolled his eyes. "They'll never think to look for us here," the biological descendent of the artificial intelligence Brainiac explained. "That gives us a chance to mount a counterattack."

"Attack, how?" Bouncing Boy demanded. "There's only the two of us left!"

"Yes, I've been giving that problem some thought," Brainiac Five agreed. He led his fellow legionnaire to a covered object in the storage room and pulled off the tarp.

"Oh, no!" Chuck immediately commented. "I know you're a Level Twelve mega-genius, but you are seriously out of your mind!"

"There is no other option," the other Legionnaire continued as he moved to the spherical device's control panel. "All of our teammates have been captured. To save them, we'll have to break the laws of time and recruit heroes from the past."

Chuck Thane did not look convinced. "But messing with history?" he hesitated. "That's risky – even for us."

Brainiac continued preparing the time bubble. "Incomplete records from the twenty first century show that three members of the

legendary Justice League once came to the future. My research indicates now is that time."

"I did my homework too, Brainy," Chuck replied grimly. "The histories say three heroes came to the future..."

"... But only two of them ever made it home," Querl completed his friend's statement with a tone of regret.

After a few hours of cleanup and explanation, the group began returning to their respective cities. Harry, after informing Raven of the nature of her new physiology, accompanied the young witch back to her room in Titans' Tower. Once there, he created a spare doorway and linked it to an extra passage in his room to allow her unrestricted access to him whenever she wished. Passing on the care package – consisting of a new uniform, wand, and several new books - from the Doctor and Henchgirl, Harry left the girl to spend some time relaxing with her friends – after scheduling a magical 'reorientation' session for later that evening, of course.

After all, the young witch seemed to get into almost as many strange confrontations as himself – it simply would not do for the newly christened Raven Black to remain ignorant of her new powers.

'Hmm,' he mused silently, 'perhaps a tutoring session on Avalon is in order. Nem would certainly enjoy meeting her...'

Despite his recent brush with the 'super demon' - as Raven's friends referred to the unlamented Trigon - Harry was in a rather good mood. This trend was surprisingly unaffected when the girl mentioned a certain book-bound Horcrux in her possession. In fact, the wizard was all too eager to accept the dark artifact. As things now stood, the new parent was still undecided as to the fate of the trapped spirit who nearly succeeded in hooking his daughter on dark magic and using her soul to free his self.

After all, throwing an enchanted book into an active volcano was certainly dramatic and all, but a bloke could always use the extra paper for the loo.

In any event, after seeing to the young witch's wellbeing, Harry accompanied the League back to the Watchtower - where Kara extolled the virtues of the buddy system while he pretended to listen.

Once the blonde powerhouse ran out of steam, she and her sister reported to the training room with Green Lantern for an assessment. Harry found himself drifting to the monitoring station, where he tracked the pair's progress along with Superman and Green Arrow.

After John gave Galatea a battery of 'entrance exams' – which she passed with nearly as good a score as Kara's record – the holographic chamber was reset and Kara stepped forward. The computer system rendered a crowded metropolitan area terrorized by two lower-echelon villains.

Needless to say, Kara ripped through the two holographic droids in a matter of seconds without effort.

"Queen Bee and Dr. Cyber?" the petite blonde-haired woman bemusedly questioned her supervisor. "Not much of a work-out."

The Green Lantern smiled and keyed his comm. link. "You hear that, Ollie?" the man voiced, "Kara thinks it's too easy."

"Well, we wouldn't want her to get bored," Green Arrow smirked as he keyed in a new simulation.

A few seconds later, Kara was sent flying, courtesy of a blast from the faux Atomic Skull.

"I hate you," she grumbled in John's direction before setting to work.

Harry leaned against the back wall behind Superman and Green Arrow as the two heroes were discussing Kara's performance in the training room. Truthfully, he was not paying them much mind, finding it far more interesting to watch the blonde girl rip the artificial enemies into small pieces. Kara might have been many things, but helpless was most definitely not one of them.

He suddenly felt Superman's gaze on him shortly, indicating that at some point the subject of the conversation changed from Kara to him. He started listening more closely.

"He seems to be a good influence on her," Oliver Queen pressed, "and she really should get out more."

"So what do you want to do?" Clark Kent queried.

"How about this...?" the archer started before turning to face Harry directly. "Mr. Black, I'm going to go down to the big city with Dinah, grab some pizza, and have some fun. You think you and Kara might like to join us?"

Harry shrugged. "Sure, as long as Kara feels up to it. Of course, it's sort of Tea's birthday, too. Would you two mind if she tagged along as well?"

The archer looked undecided. "Are you sure she's trustworthy?"

The wizard nodded. "We did spend several months together," Harry reminded the other man. "She's fine; she's just got a few issues she needs to resolve with Cadmus, is all."

"Alright," Oliver acquiesced, "why don't we go and ask them, then?"

Harry nodded in agreement and followed Ollie to the simulator.

"Well?" Kara asked her trainer as the session ended.

Eyebrow raised, the Green Lantern questioned, "Well, what?"

"Aren't you going to give me notes about all the stuff I screwed up?" the blonde girl demanded.

"No notes, Kara," John informed her in a pleased tone. "I've got nothing left to teach you."

Galatea smirked. "I admit; you might even have some small skill."

Kara glared at her 'sister' as Oliver and Harry approached the trio.

"Not bad, Kiddo," Green Arrow complimented, "you set a new course record for that simulation."

As the billionaire patted the girl's shoulder, a strange glowing sphere engulfed the group. Without a second thought, Harry quickly Apparated the remaining distance to Kara's side just before the globe could vanish.

The glare faded and Harry found himself, alongside his four friends, standing in futuristic-looking surroundings. In fact, one might even describe the apparent storage facility as 'disturbingly futuristic' - as in a futuristic avant-garde of die-hard futurists.

While he might not yet have all the answers, the wizard was willing to bet that the two individuals approaching them could shed some light on the matter. At the moment, however, they seemed slightly confused as well. His enhanced hearing managed to pick out the sentence 'I thought there was only supposed to be three of them?' before the strange pair drew up in front of them. The blonde teenager with a quite unusual skin color spoke.

"I'm certain that this must be disorienting for you," the strange figure announced. "My name is-"

"Brainiac!" Kara growled.

"Yes, but how did you... uh oh," the apparently biological Brainiac managed to say before Supergirl threw herself at him.

Following her lead, Harry had both of the potential hostiles levitated, body-bound, and facing the business end of his scythe before Kara could punch Brainiac's force field a second time.

"So this is Brainiac, eh?" Harry questioned as he inspected his prisoners. "I was expecting something less... organic."

"Last time I saw him, he was," Kara barked out shortly, her gaze never leaving the pair of now-panicking individuals – if the frantic motion of their eyeballs was any indicator. "Not that it'll matter in about three seconds."

"Whoa, Sparky!" Green Arrow cautioned as he caught her raised fist. "Let's hear what he has to say."

Harry looked at Kara questioningly.

"Alright, fine, but if it so much as blinks wrong, I want you to trash it, Joe," the Argosian finally relented.

The wizard nodded. "As you wish," he confirmed before canceling the spells on the pair. "You heard the little lady," Harry addressed

the former captives in an emotionless tone as they picked themselves up off the ground. "Explanation! Now!"

"Thank you!" the cybernetic being said gratefully. "Yes, I am a Brainiac, but I'm not a machine; I'm organic. The universe-conquering Brainiac that you knew is my distant ancestor. Over time, he learned how to pass his code down biologically. I am Brainiac Five. Think of me as the black sheep of my family, dedicated to doing good to make up for my ancestors' legacy of evil."

"And you demonstrated that by kidnapping us," John dryly followed up the introduction.

"We'd never have done it if the situation wasn't so dire," Brainiac's companion pleaded.

Harry groaned. "Not again!" Looking at Supergirl and the Green Lantern, he grumbled, "One of the two of you is a bad luck charm. I just don't know which one – yet."

"Whatdya mean?" Oliver questioned.

The wizard took a deep breath. "We've been brought here because there is some sort of evil person in this time... reality... whatever, that our new friends here can't handle. It's bloody Skartaris all over again!"

"Umm... yeah. That pretty much covers it," the squat man admitted embarrassedly, "except I don't know what a 'Skartaris' is."

"Where are we, anyway?" Galatea asked curiously.

"Approximately one thousand years into your future," Querl Dox supplied levelly, "in what you would call the thirty first century."

John crossed his arms and glowered. "Time travel... swell."

"It's a real thrill for me to meet you, Sir," Brainiac's friend address the Green Lantern. "You're the famous John Stewart, father of-"

"You want to shut up before you create a time paradox?" the ex-Marine barked irritably.

"Sorry," the other man uttered before smiling again and holding out his hand. "Chuck Thane. Code name: Bouncing Boy."

The other Leaguers introduced themselves and shortly, it was Harry's turn.

"Alright, I can understand how Galatea's and Kara's records might have been jumbled and throwing off the count, but history never recorded you, either," Brainiac Five acknowledged. "In fact, I don't recall reading anything about you."

Harry raised an eyebrow. "Oh?" he questioned. "Well, that's remedied easily enough." The wizard dug into his wallet in search of one of his Chocolate Frog cards. Finally grasping the elusive paper, he held out a card for their perusal, belatedly recognizing that he had seized the wrong card. Instead of the brief biographical info, Harry was mistakenly holding one of Zatanna's tarot cards that she had misplaced earlier.

More specifically, he was holding the Death card.

"Sorry 'bout that," the mage offered as he replaced the card in his pocket and selected the proper target on his second attempt. "This should prove more useful to you," Harry announced as he passed them one of the self-updating 'Mr. Black' frog cards.

Privately, Harry gained a certain amount of satisfaction from the expressions on their faces once they recognized him. Idly, he wondered what effects the journey forward in time had on the card's automatically updating content.

Chuck Thane shivered as he suddenly realized the depths of their situation. In their desperate recruitment of heroes from the past for assistance with the current crisis, they had made a mistake.

A very serious mistake.

Being a historian, Chuck was the Legion's keeper of knowledge and, as such, had complete access to all of the inherited databanks from Earth's previous heroic organizations. While some names appeared with more than one group, there was one common listing, one name that kept turning up again and again, sometimes years apart, sometimes as much as a century apart.

Mr. Black.

Under the Legion's most stringent encryption, Chuck had read the original Justice League members' reports on the – according to some – nonexistent entity. Among the others, the common opinion was that Mr. Black was simply an extremely powerful immortal – or perhaps, some sort of god.

Chuck Thane, however, knew better. He was staring into the very face of Death itself, a being that the League's documentation purported as containing both the beginning and the end of the universe in the palm of his hand.

A being who, if he so wished, could turn off the universe in an instant.

Nothing in any of the League records indicated that Mr. Black had left on this temporal trip with Supergirl and the others, which made him even more nervous.

What else was missing from those records?

For a long moment, the two were completely and utterly silent. Finally, the blonde boy spoke in a carefully mastered, perfectly calm voice of someone who just learned that one unfortunate word could bring the Apocalypse down upon his head.

"I... apologize for our rash actions, Mr. Black," the Legionnaire said apologetically. "If I may, I can explain the situation in greater detail."

Crossing his arms, Harry stared at the suddenly reticent teenager and nodded sharply. "Let's have it," he grumbled. "Why did you bring us here?"

Brainiac walked to a computer console and showed the time travelers a short presentation regarding the 'Legion of Superheroes', as well as the trouble currently plaguing them.

Once it was finished, Harry snorted. "So, let me recap. You had a galaxy-spanning force consisting of metahumans of virtually every level and ability, and five costumed freaks – these Fatal Five - took

down everyone but the two of you? I must admit; I can't decide whether to laugh at you or pity you."

"Okay, so how can we help?" John Stewart asked, ignoring the wizard's rather apt assessment.

Harry shot the dark-skinned man a faintly betrayed look as Kara verbally protested.

"Whoa! Time out!" she called before motioning for the Leaguers to retreat a few paces.

"The date we pulled her from is exactly when Supergirl vanished from the historical records!" Chuck whispered fiercely as the Justice League members retreated to the other side of the room. "Brainy, she's going to die! We have to tell her."

"No," Brainiac disagreed, "telling her could change history. Keep quiet, Chuck. That's an order."

Chuck frowned at the taller man. "You know, Brainiac? For being a twelfth-level mega-genius, you're being remarkably stupid. In case you missed it, she seems really close to Mr. Black – you know, Death Incarnate? If we don't tell them, He. Will. Kill. Us. He might even resurrect us... just so he can kill us again! Then where will our teammates be?"

The blue-skinned mastermind looked over at their... reinforcements speculatively. "Your objection does have a certain amount of logic to it," Querl allowed. "I will consider the matter further."

Kara looked at the huddled Leaguers and asked, "Am I the only person to think that we shouldn't trust a Brainiac?"

"I'm not getting a bad vibe off the kid," Oliver commented.

The wizard looked over at the pair exchanging urgent whispers that his doubly enhanced hearing easily overheard. "They haven't lied, true, but they've not being entirely open with us either – on Brainiac's order."

Judging by the startled looks on both Kara's and Tea's faces, he was apparently the only one who had eavesdropped on the other conversation.

"All right then," Green Lantern decided. "Let's call their hand." The group approached the future heroes. "We're in," John announced, "provided that you explain exactly why you hid important information during your mission briefing."

"You know?" Bouncing Boy asked, startled.

"He did," the Green Lantern pointed at Harry. "Now, I advise you to come clean with us right now before I ask Mr. Black to return us to our own time and do with you as he will."

Recognizing the obvious cue, Harry grinned wickedly at the Legionnaires and began playing with his scythe.

"Well..." Bouncing Boy hedged as the two future superheroes exchanged a look. "The thing is that Supergirl... she..."

"According to the historical records," Brainiac interrupted gloomily, "Supergirl didn't survive the mission."

There was a sharp intake of breath at his side. Harry turned to see that Kara had gone slightly pale. Pulling the shorter figure in for a one-armed hug – which was immediately accepted and returned – Harry bent down and asked lowly, "You don't think I'd let anything happen to you, do you?"

"But history shows she didn't return with the rest of the Leaguers-" Brainiac began to insist.

"She. Shall. Not. Die." Harry interrupted with a barely withheld growl. "I will not allow it! Your continued survival, on the other hand, isn't looking too good at the moment," he threatened, gesturing with the scythe for emphasis.

Kara closed her eyes for a second as she tried to collect herself. Taking a deep breath, she said in an almost normal tone, "Alright, let's get this over with. What's next?"

Brainiac led the group down a lit corridor. "The lab's this way," he supplied. "The tech is out of date but we should find enough-"

Whatever they would find enough of would remain a mystery as a bright light erupted in front of the group, heralding the arrival of a strange group – including a giant, floating eyeball. The emerald orb immediately began shooting energy at them, which John shielded against with his ring.

Frowning in annoyance, Harry stretched out one hand and the crimson aftereffect of the Reductor Curse stained the air as the hovering sphere blew apart in a wave of magical energy. Oddly enough, the scantily clad woman whom Harry recognized from their briefing as the Emerald Empress immediately fell to the ground, writhing in agony, as the wizard decorated the walls with the eye's remains.

The sole remaining invader, the Persuader, stood gob smacked at the sudden reversal in fortune, and Harry smiled grimly as he summoned the man's hefty axe to his own hand. The sudden loss of his weapon returned the hooded figure to reality, and he backpedaled from the ominous man easily twirling the stolen axe in one hand.

Harry twitched his finger and the other man flew towards him. A swift swing of the axe diverted his flight to an uncomfortable landing at their feet. Turning to the two Legionnaires with a satisfied air, Harry said, "Alright, Junior, there's a stool pigeon for you. Now you won't have to waste so much time finding their new headquarters."

John lowered their shield with the sudden absence of hostiles, and Brainiac began making disconcerted noises. "I can't... you couldn't have... how did you do that?"

"Lots of practice," Harry admitted. "Now, interrogate the prisoner so we can go home."

"The Fatal Five have psionic blockers; I can't get through its jamming to scan his thoughts," Brainiac protested.

Harry rolled his eyes. "Oh, for the love of... All right, pay attention as Uncle Joe teaches you how to question a stoolie." He looked over at Kara and Galatea, winked, then drew back one booted foot and

kicked the prostrate figure against the wall. The mage grinned at the man's renewed groans of pain.

"Let me start off by introducing myself," the wizard began. "I'm Mr. Black." He smiled at the recumbent figure's widened eyes; if his embellished reputation extended to this time, then he should be able to get answers much easier than he would otherwise.

"Listen up, mate, here's the deal," Harry continued in a decisive tone. "I just finished killing a real nasty demon named Trigon a few hours ago -" another flinch betrayed the future denizens' knowledge of that event as well "- and it's left me rather irritated. Then, I get dragged a millennium into the future because you and your friends are being naughty, which upset me even more."

Harry grabbed the man around his throat with one hand and slammed Persuader's back against the wall - hard.

"So, you've got five seconds to tell me where your mates are hiding the Legionnaires, or I'm gonna take my frustrations out on you!" the non-human wizard growled.

Though visibly shaken, the masked man remained silent.

"That's it, you skanky little tosser!" Harry shouted, sending his other fist through the metal plating next to the Persuader's head. "I'm gonna rip out your spine and use it to floss!"

Kara grabbed hold of Harry's arm as he withdrew it from the wall. "Joe! No! That won't help! Calm down!"

Throwing the now bruised man back on the floor, Harry pledged, "I'll going to kill that waster! I'll have his guts for my boot laces!"

As Kara made to restrain Harry, Galatea leaned over and helped the man to his feet. "Sorry about that," she said sheepishly, "are you ok? We're trying, but my sister and I can't hold him off forever. If you can just give me the Legionnaires' location, though, I'll be able to use that to protect you. Just that one thing. Go on, where are your friends hiding them?"

The pressure finally caught up with the axe-wielding criminal. "All right! All right! I'll talk! Just keep him away from me!"

Out of his field of view, Harry and Kara exchanged smiles. After the man confessed to a rather large number of crimes – including the fact that he cheated on grammar tests in primary school – Galatea punched the man hard enough to ensure several hours of unconsciousness.

"Nice job, 'bad cop'," Galatea praised as she rejoined the group.

Harry smiled as he mercifully stunned the still-screaming Empress. "Thanks. You don't think that it was too... over the top?" he asked mildly.

The clone shook her head as Kara looked at him disbelievingly. "You threatened to floss with his spine?" she protested. "Eww! That's disgusting!"

The wizard shrugged. "It was the first threat that came to mind," he tried to excuse himself.

"Wait a minute," Brainiac interrupted. "You mean that you were only pretending to be angry?"

Harry fixed the two Legionnaires with a firm stare. "Oh, no, I'm quite irritated at the situation in general and you two in particular. I'm just not at the berserker stage – yet."

He gave his latest acquisition a final glance before stowing the sleek battle-axe in his gauntlet. "So, how about you show us to your transport ship and we can go save your friends?"

"I heard a joke about you once, E," John Constantine commented as he waited with Mister E and the Stranger.

"A joke?" the blind man queried.

"I think it was a joke," John clarified. "Bloke I met in a bar in Katmandu said you always carried a pocket full of stakes in case you met a vampire. And a gun loaded with silver bullets in case you met a werewolf."

The man pulled a bloodstained wooden stake from his coat.

"Blimey!" John exclaimed softly. "I take it you hammer first and ask questions afterwards."

"The only good vampire is a dead vampire, Constantine," the Bostonite said levelly.

John smirked. "I'm sure they'd agree with you on that score," he commented. "You ought to watch it, you know. One day the bogeymen are going to come out of their closets and start parading down the high street. They'll be marching for equal rights, free blood, and your head on a platter."

The visually challenged man cocked his head to the side. "Is that some kind of joke, Constantine?"

"If you're lucky," he fired back. "Cigarette?"

"Unlike you, I do not defile the temple of my body, Constantine," the man rejected snobbishly.

John's smirk grew wider. "In that case, I suppose a quick-"

"Quiet, you two," the Stranger interrupted. "They are returning."

"Hullo, Tim," John greeted. "How was fairyland?"

"I-I'm not sure I remember it all properly, John," the teenager responded confusedly. "It's all gone a bit fuzzy. There were these women... and a house with chicken legs... and... It was like a dream. I sort-of-remember it, but I don't think I can talk about it. Not in a way that would make sense."

"Are you hungry, child," the Stranger considerately asked, "or are you ready for your final journey?"

"I don't know," Tim answered honestly. "I think I'm ready. And I suppose that he's going to be my guide?" he asked while pointing at the blind man.

"Yes," Mister E replied. "I, too, am ready."

"Okay, Yo-yo," the young wizard-to-be cautioned the bird, "we're going to see tomorrow..."

His new guide seemed to have a different plan, however. "No. The owl is a bird of darkness and night; it shall remain here."

"Tim?" the Stranger prompted.

"Yeah, okay. You stay here then, okay?" he told the owl, who flew to the Stranger's outstretched arm.

"Hold my arm, boy," Mister E instructed.

Tim looked at him confusedly. "I thought that if you were, well, blind, then you'd want to hold my arm."

"Where we are going, it is you who will be walking blind," the man advised. "Now, close your eyes and step forward, child."

"Just walk?" Tim questioned.

"Yes, and keep your eyes tightly closed as you walk," the man repeated, "until I tell you to halt, and to open them."

As the pair disappeared, John said, "I don't know about you two, but I have a bad feeling about this. He's not exactly what you'd call well-balanced, is he?"

"No," the Stranger admitted, "he's not, but we have no other choice. Can you travel into the future, John Constantine?"

"Only like everyone else, Boss," he replied. "You know, one minute at a time. Now that you mention it, though, there is another guy who can time-walk that I meant to ask you about."

"Oh?" the Stranger queried as both he and Dr. Occult showed signs of interest.

"Yeah, I bumped into him while I was showing Tim around the States," John continued. He calls himself Mister Black. You know anything about him?"

The Stranger paused in thought for a moment as his glowing eyes seeming to widen slightly. "He is... an Enigma," the other man finally uttered.

"You've got to know more than that!" John said after a few seconds before muttering something unintelligible.

The man huffed in amusement. "Black has a... reputation... as you know. He has been identified as many things, many beings, including Death, Gabriel van Helsing, the Leader of the Four Horsemen, and more. Some worlds hold him responsible for the destructions of many civilizations, such as Atlantis or the Roman Empire. In fact, he was once even thought to be a famous wizard by the name of Harry Potter, although that has been traced to a... questionable... magazine."

John sighed in relief and took another hit on his beer. "So, he isn't the Archangel Gabriel, then?" he asked hopefully. He had enough problems with those on high as it was; he really did not want to complicate them with an unknown factor like Black.

"I... cannot be certain of that," the Stranger reluctantly admitted. "His actions do reflect those of the leader of the Cherubim and Seraphim - especially his protective actions towards the innocent children. Again, I cannot say that for sure, however."

Constantine's eyes bugged before he took another drag off his cigarette. "You're bloody telling me that he may be Gabriel? Then why is he here, and why now?" John demanded while signaling for a refill.

The Stranger just shrugged. "Gabriel has not been... on a vacation... for a while. From what I can gather, most of Mr. Black's more interesting... exploits... occur when he is on vacation."

"Nice ship!" Kara reluctantly admitted as the group flew through space towards the capital city of the United Planets.

"It's strictly no frills, but its fast," Brainiac acknowledged with a slight show of pride. "What do you pilot back home?"

The Argosian looked off to the side. "Usually just a pickup," she muttered.

"A... 'pickup'?" Brainiac repeated confusedly. "Is that a type of star cruiser?"

"Yes. Yes, it is," Oliver interrupted in an attempt to keep Kara from feeling even more embarrassed.

As Kara shot Green Arrow a brief smile, their pilot announced, "We're going into orbit."

"And we've got company!" Supergirl called from her seat in navigation.

Chuck brought up an image on the main screen showing an orbiting cannon-shaped spaceship.

"Nice," Harry muttered from his conjured recliner on the forward deck. "I want one."

A door in the side of the enemy vessel suddenly opened, and a swarm of mind-controlled Legionnaires exited the ship. Unexpectedly, however, the minions headed planet side, towards the city, rather than Brainiac's fast-approaching cruiser.

"Alrighty then," Harry acknowledged as he turned to the two future heroes, "what sort of non-lethal weapons does this tub have? Tractor beam? Energy nets?"

Brainiac grimaced. "Sorry, but I did say 'no frills'. This vessel was built for speed, not combat."

The wizard rolled his eyes before standing and Vanishing his chair. "Fine, I'll go introduce myself while you lot find this mind control gadget and smash it," he grumbled. "I probably couldn't tell the difference between this 'psion transmitter' and a futuristic coffeemaker, anyway."

"Hey!" Kara protested. "Even you would be hard pressed to track that many opponents at once without letting a couple slip through. You're going to need some help; I'm coming."

Harry smiled. "Sorry, Kara, but we need you to find this gizmo and get that bunch back to normal."

"Galatea, Green Arrow, and myself can hold off the remaining three Fatal Five members," John announced authoritatively. "That will free

Brainiac Five and Bouncing Boy to locate and disable the device. Kara, you and Mr. Black restrain those Legionnaires until they do."

"Righto," Harry acknowledged with a jaunty wave before turning to Kara and proffering an arm. "Coming, milady?" he asked facetiously.

Kara smiled in anticipation and threaded her arm through his. "Wouldn't miss it. Hit it, Joe!"

One Apparation later lessened the ship's passenger roster by two.

"Alright, Genius," Green Arrow stated when the two Legionnaires remained staring dumbfounded at where Harry and Kara had just been, "how about you put that big brain of yours to working finding the best way onto that ship?"

The organic Brainiac looked at the other ship with narrowed eyes. "I'll get us in," he promised before throttling the ship to full and dodging the laser battery fire. Once he neared the other vessel's cockpit, he dove the arrowed fuselage into his target – the docking bay.

"I love the direct approach!" Oliver cheered as he pulled a bolt from his Never Ending Quiver.

"You can open your eyes now, Boy," Mister E announced. "We are fifteen years in your future - or rather, one of them. There are very few stable futures, Boy."

At Tim's confused look, the man expounded. "The way my father told it to me, the future is a series of infinitely searching possibilities. When we walk it, we walk down the most probably paths, those with the greatest likelihood of occurring - but nothing in the future is definite. Some times are periods of great flux – the next hundred years or so are a wash of conflicting events. Others are relatively stable – so that almost any future path you walk takes you to the same universe."

"But we aren't really traveling into the future, are we?" Tim questioned. "This is more like when the guy in the black coat showed me the past, isn't it? We're just watching it?"

His guide shook his head negatively. "No. We are truly in the future. Or futures."

Tim looked around disgustedly at the massive battle around them. Scattered throughout the carnage, the boy could spot certain individuals he had met on his trip with Constantine. "What's going on?"

"We are at the final magical conflict of this age," the blind man explained. "The battle between good and evil, between life and death. You watch the last battle, child. Fifteen years in your future; they fight, and they fall. Possibly, possibly..."

A group of demons scrambled past the two time travelers, drawing Tim's attention.

"Those are the creatures of darkness, Timothy," the man answered the unasked question. "The hordes of M'Nagalah, the great god of cancer, all sharing their lord's grim mind, and his desire to consume the world."

He began gesturing at other groups of combatants. "The Vampire queens of the cult of the blood-red moon. Eclipso, the lord of the no-man's land between light and darkness-

"Look! That's Zatanna!" Tim interrupted, pointed at the battered Enchantress. "She's hurt! Can't we do something?"

"Why should we do anything?" Mister E asked honestly. "This world is a possibility. Don't you understand? It hasn't happened yet. It may never happen – or not like this."

"So, who wins?" Tim resignedly inquired.

"Either side," the man admitted. "In some futures, one side; in other futures, the other. The line-up changes as well. It is sad but true that the dividing line between good and evil blurs in the realm of magic. Sometimes, I think that I alone am pure."

A sudden cough drew Tim's attention to a crumpled figure. Tim approached the man, shocked to find himself staring at a wounded John Constantine.

"More ghosts?" the blonde man grunted weakly.

"Sort of," Tim replied. "We're from the past. Can you see us?"

John snorted. "I don't know. I think I may be delirious." He coughed harder, bringing up some blood. "Huh. Blood. I don't want to die." His eyes suddenly grew sharper. "Tim? Tim Hunter?"

"Yes," Tim nodded in agreement.

"You little bastard!" John cursed spitefully. "I thought you were such a nice kid. I should have strangled you myself, fifteen years ago. Or let them kill you. Would have saved us all a lot of grief. E had the right idea..."

Tim looked at his friend worriedly. "Wh-what are you talking about, John? We're friends..."

"What am I talking about?" the dying man demanded incredulously. "Do you see him, up there?" he asked, weakly pointing at a high-flying figure firing energy on the various forces of good.

"In the blue suit?" the boy inquired. "Sure."

Constantine coughed again. "That's you, Tim. You as you are now."

The young wizard looked horrified. "No! It's not true! It won't happen like that!"

"I'm sorry, kid," John said tiredly. "It already happened. Could you... could you light this cigarette for me? The lighter's on the ground. It's just that I can't seem to move my arm."

Tim did as he bid, earning a weak 'Thanks'.

"Is he me?" Tim asked his guide. "Was that true?"

"Yes," the blind man replied bluntly.

"Really?" Tim asked, downcast.

"It... it's not the only future," the man admitted. "There are others in which you are a mage supreme, the champion of light – and there

are an infinite number of others where you are entirely uninvolved in this battle on either side. Indeed, there are many futures in which this battle will never occur."

"I don't understand," the boy cried out, frustrated. "So is this one more likely than the others?"

"No," the man said simply.

"Then why bring me here? Are you just trying to upset me?" the child demanded.

"I felt you should see it. That was all," Mister E supplied.

Tim frowned. "I don't like you, Mister E – or whatever your name is," he finally said.

"And I do not permit affection - or lack thereof – to influence my actions. There is good, and there is evil. The good must be protected, the evil eradicated. I have shown you the triumph of evil, as a caution."

"I'm just a kid!" Tim protested. "I shouldn't have to see this stuff. Take me away from here."

"Very well," his guide complied, and the scene dissolved.

"Alright, no biggie," Kara said aloud to herself as she and Harry stood on top of the capital building. "It's just like a training session."

Harry smiled at the girl's show of nervousness and tried to take the edge off her mind from the impending battle. "Care for a wager?" he asked.

"Like what?" she asked suspiciously.

"We see who can take down the most Legionnaires before they snap out of it," the wizard explained. "You're twenty one today so... loser buys the drinks?"

The blonde-haired woman narrowed her eyes at the challenge. "You're on!" She checked the sky again. "Here they come!"

The pair suddenly had their hands full trying to defeat the involuntary army without doing any serious harm to it in the process. Still a beginning student in magic, Kara resorted to purely physical means to subdue her opponents, while Harry employed a variety of charms and hexes in addition to the aerial brawling.

Harry grinned wolfishly. This hero stuff was actually pretty fun.

Galatea knocked down the door leading to the cockpit with virtually no effort. Immediately following her lead, John and Oliver ducked into the room. As expected, the three Leaguers encountered Tharok, Mano, and Validus.

"The giant tin can's mine!" Kara's sister called before rushing the tall cybernetic creature.

"I'll take Toasty," Green Lantern decided when the chemically-altered mutant melted through a support beam's base, nearly sending it on top of them.

As Tharok began stalking towards the billionaire, Oliver fired an electric arrow into the villain's mechanical half. "I guess that means you're my dance partner, Half-a-Man," the archer quipped as he readied the next salvo. "How's it coming, Kids?" he called over his shoulder.

"Almost got it!" Brainiac Five replied, elbow deep in the strange coffee table-shaped device.

"Incoming!" the white-clad female metahuman called out, causing the two Legionnaires to flee. An instant later, the broken remains of Validus landed on the psion transmitter, crushing it and canceling the nefarious carrier wave.

"That was easy!" Galatea quipped as Green Lantern's boxing glove construct sent the now-unconscious Mano careening in Tharok, ultimately melting through most of the cyborg's systems and shorting out the sole remaining threat.

Brushing her hands off dismissively, the cloned Argosian commented, "You know, I'm kinda hungry!"

"Eight!" Harry called out cheerfully as he banished a mechanical gorilla into spandex-clad redhead with – of all things - a lighting bolt scar across one eye. "Nine!" he revised.

Kara grabbed the leg of the giant-sized opponent she had just K. and swung the figure like a club, rendering another four Legionnaires unconscious. "Twelve!" she announced through a bright smile.

Harry glared half-heartedly at the smirking blonde figure. "That still only counts as one!" he protested.

Another three caught her unaware and hit the girl with three separate energy blasts. Harry instantly shielded the girl before stunning her attackers.

Supergirl dove forward and caught the three comatose bodies before they could splatter against the ground. "Thanks!" she yelled in gratitude.

Harry shot her a jaunty salute before pivoting to hex a couple of Legionnaires approaching him from behind. "That makes me fourteen to your twelve!" he noted loudly.

A burst of energy suddenly swept through the crowd, vaporizing the control disks as it passed.

"Game, set, and match!" the wizard called into the sudden ceasefire. "The winner, and still champ – Mr. Black!" he rubbed in as Kara flew up to his side.

"Yeah, yeah," she muttered good-naturedly. "I was winning and you know it."

Harry smiled. "You know, we make a pretty good team," he noted.

"Yeah, we do," Kara replied quietly while staring at him.

The wizard held out a hand to shake. "Well, here's to a long and successful partnership," he offered.

The Argosian looked down at the hand for a moment before batting it aside. Before Harry could comment, she leaped the remaining

distance and wrapped both arms and legs around him in what nearly anyone else would consider a painful embrace.

"Sounds like a plan," she murmured before proceeding to occupy the wizard's mouth with much more entertaining activities than commentary.

A couple of hours later found the Leaguers and Legionnaires essentially cleaning up the area and debriefing each other.

"I still cannot fathom how the Fatal Five's battle cruiser could simply disappear from orbit!" Brainiac Five repeated for the seventh time in a frustrated tone. "We made sure that no one was left on board, and I disabled the automatic systems myself. There is no rational explanation for why it suddenly vanished."

"Listen, Brainy, the important thing is that we stopped the Fatal Five and saved the United Planets," Chuck Thane soothed. "The ship is no great loss, even if the case is never solved."

Kara looked suspiciously over at Harry, who was once again wearing his leather tri-corn hat and humming what she could have sworn was a pirate's song under his breath.

Apparently, she was not the only one who had an inkling of the spacecraft's fate, seeing as how both Galatea and Oliver – both of whom had been on the Avalon expedition when Jason Blood made mention of the notorious pirate Blackbeard – were looking askance at the wizard as well.

"Yeah, a real mystery for the ages... right, Joe?" the Argosian sarcastically questioned her oblivious – and now, official - boyfriend.

"We pillage, we plunder, we rifle and loot! Drink up me hearties, yo ho! We kidnap and ravage and don't give a hoot! Drink up me hearties,' - Did you say something, Kara?" the wizard asked as he heard his name mentioned.

"Never mind, Joe, I just answered my own question," the blonde girl replied resignedly.

Harry nodded. "Right, then. Can we leave now?" he asked the muttering Brainiac.

"Well, we don't have transportation for everyone to get back to Legion HQ, so we'll first have to..."

Harry tuned the teenager out and sighed. Apparently, he would have to resolve this mess as well. Withdrawing an extra large Black Hole from his coat, Harry tossed it on an available wall and set it for the Legion's hanger.

"Somebody can fly the cloud-hopper through that portal," he ordered. "Everybody else, come on." Without waiting for a reply, he walked through the inky black transport.

Within moments, the entire Legion plus a few Leaguers and one pocketed spacecraft was standing on another planet. After Brainiac's ship appeared, Harry returned the portal to his pocket before looking at Brainiac expectantly.

"Right," the blue-skinned boy said distractedly. "Follow me."

He led the group back to the storage room with the time traveling device. Once the goodbyes were exchanged, the Leaguers took their place on the platform and Brainiac activated the device, transporting the group back to their proper time.

Unfortunately, the universe was not yet finished with its spittoon and, by extension, the blonde figure holding onto the spittoon. This, of course, would explain how that, when the time bubble arrived ten centuries previous, its only passengers were Galatea, John, and Oliver.

Superman, who was anxiously standing watch over the training room as Steel scanned the energy signatures, immediately charged over when the strange bubble appeared again. Within a fraction of a second, he inventoried the new arrivals and discovered the shortage.

"Where's Kara?" he demanded.

The three time travelers looked at each other confusedly before Oliver took off his cap and scratched his head. "Uhm... about that..." he began.

"Shouldn't they be back by now?" Dr. Occult questioned.

The Stranger nodded, and simply answered, "Yes."

"Is there a problem?" John Constantine demanded.

"I am afraid so," the Stranger expounded. "They are lost to me. Wherever they have gone, it is so far in the future that I can no longer feel them. Occult?"

"Yes, they are gone," the other man confirmed. "Completely."

"This is ridiculous!" John shouted. "What are you saying? That they've headed off into the far future, and there nothing you can do to get them back?"

"Not without help, no," the Stranger admitted calmly.

John shook his head wildly. "I can't believe it! You'd trust Tim to a loony whose dad popped out his eyes with a sharpened spoon? I mean, after what happened to him and his sister, it's hardly surprising that he's not dealing with a full deck, is it? I can't believe you did it. There are beds of kelp smarter than you, Mate!"

"I have made a mistake, Constantine, I realize that," the Trench Coat Brigade's unofficial leader admitted. "I apologize."

"That's not going to bring Tim back," the British Occult specialist protested. "He's just a kid; he trusted us to keep him safe. I don't-"

"-Believe it," Dr. Occult interrupted. "We know. To err is human, John Constantine."

"If he's human, then I'm a toast-rack," the blonde man mumbled.

"We must concentrate our efforts on getting them back," the Stranger said intently. "This bickering is futile."

John looked back at his 'boss'. "Can't you reach them? Aren't there any gods or demons or anything you could send to get them back?"

"No, I cannot," the man said regrettably, before suddenly smiling slightly.

"What?" Constantine demanded suspiciously.

His eyes shining slightly brighter, the leader of the Trench Coat Brigade announced, "However, the Universe itself is not without its instruments. I do believe that one has been dispatched to retrieve young Tim."

"Truly?" John asked with a certain amount of hope.

"Yes," the other man confirmed in a satisfied manner. "You know him as Mr. Black."

"Where are we now?" Mister E asked. "What do you see?"

Tim looked around at the lack of surroundings. "Nothing," he informed his blind guide, "it's not even black. It's just nothing."

The man nodded. "I can go no further. This is the end, Tim."

"Oh. Great," the boy said sarcastically. "Well, once you've been to the end of the universe, what else is there to do? I'd write my name on something, but there's nothing to write on." He sighed. "All right. Let's go back home. I'm bored."

"Very well," the guide said with an odd hitch in his voice. "Come here. Let me hold you."

Tim eyed the strange man suspiciously. "What's that behind your back? What are you holding?"

"Come here, I said!" Mister E yelled as he leaped towards the sound of his charge's voice, the bloodstained wooden stake in hand.

"What's going on?" Tim demanded as he backpedaled. "What's with you?"

"I don't want to hurt you, Timothy," the man exclaimed as he dove blindly again, stake swinging. "I want to protect you from the world - because it could corrupt you. There are women out there, Timothy, legs and breasts and thighs and... and... believe me, this is for your own good."

As the man drew nearer, the young wizard expressed his gratitude by sinking his teeth into his guide's questing hand.

"You cannot hurt me," Mister E confidently stated. "Mine is the glory of rightness. Mine is courage unsullied."

"So you bring me here, where there's absolutely no chance of anyone rescuing me?" the boy demanded incredulously. "Yeah, that's courage, all right."

"Say goodbye, Child," the man responded quietly before leaping again, this time finding his mark in the young wizard's heart.

It was at this moment that the Universe chose to intervene, as Harry and Kara appeared in the void just as the blow landed. The wizard staggered where he landed as, at the very precipice of the end of all things, time itself became meaningless, and knowledge that he had not yet acquired became temporarily accessible. Upon further reflection, he realized that the additional information was actually the unprocessed 'gift' from Death's ring.

Shaking his head as if to clear it, the emerald-eyed immortal took in the scene before him with cold, piercing eyes. "No," he commanded sharply, and the raving lunatic was Banished far from the boy he had sworn to protect. Rushing to the child's side, Harry could clearly see the grievous wound in his chest.

"You would protect the one that will become the greatest evil of all?" the insane blind man shouted at Harry.

Two smoldering green eyes, carrying the promise of swift retribution, locked onto the man's unseeing orbs. "Be silent!" Harry ordered, and the mortal was.

"Kara, come here," the wizard entreated, struggling to keep his voice calm. Applying every applicable healing charm he could, Harry succeeded in temporarily stabilizing the boy's condition.

The blonde girl gasped. "Is he...?"

"He is alive... for the moment," Harry announced. "His pulse is weak and irregular; breathing's shallow. I've slowed things down slightly, but his condition is still worsening."

"Can you not do anything for him?" Supergirl asked anxiously as she knelt by the boy's side.

Harry considered the situation through the vantage point that his current temporal location allowed. "If I filter out the poisonous aspects, my blood has certain restorative powers," he admitted, "but it would still be too potent for a normal human to incorporate."

Kara frowned in thought. "What about my blood?" she offered. "It is mostly compatible with humans."

The wizard shook his head. "You simply don't have a fast enough recovery rate to do him any good."

"Not alone," she theorized, "but you did say that we made a good team. Perhaps together..."

"It could work," he finally admitted, "but his life would be forever altered. Our blood – and our curses – will forever be his to bear as well. Could you accept that, knowing that he would – biologically, at least - be our son?"

"At least he'd have a life," Kara insisted passionately. "So, how do we do this? By injection?"

Harry nodded before conjuring the necessary instrument. After employing his blood-filtering armband, the wizard opened a vein and filled the vial to the halfway point. Kara offered her arm, and he collected her contribution as well.

Gently easing the needle into the boy's major artery, Harry quietly pleaded, "Forgive us for what we are about to do," and depressed the plunger. Tim's body arched once in pain before relaxing into unconsciousness.

"If he's got any of my powers, then we should put him under a yellow sun lamp," Kara informed him. Harry nodded and conjured several freestanding mirrors, replete with tanning charms.

"Come on, Tim," the girl urged as she wiped his brow. "Don't give up on us now." Waiting, she reflected, was one of the hardest things

that she ever had to do. It was frustrating that, for all of her power, there was absolute nothing more that she could do.

Harry caught a glance of the perpetrator attempting to sneak off into the void, and took great satisfaction in sending several debilitating curses at the man. Once he was certain that his prisoner would not escape the party prematurely, the wizard settled in to wait.

After about ten minutes, Tim started to make a marked improvement.

Harry breathed a sigh of relief and stated, "He's okay. His breathing's improved and his pulse is steady." His eyes turned to the magically restrained figure. "Now, I have something else to attend to."

At finally acknowledging his fury, Henchgirl's latent potion activated, transforming his visage into a skull with blazing emerald sparks in the eye sockets.

Kara nodded in morbid – if not vicious - agreement. "Make sure that he pays for this," she ordered from her place at Tim's side. "A lot."

Harry looked back at the kneeling metahuman and nodded sharply. "He shall," the man-shaped magician vowed in a taut voice.

He transported himself behind the blind zealot with a thought and levitated the insane man to eye level. "What do you think you were doing?" the time-traveling wizard demanded in a frigid voice.

"I must kill him," the blind time walker shrieked, "before he becomes the most evil being on the planet!"

Harry's intense eyes narrowed. "So, you would commit this great evil... just to eliminate the possibility of this innocent boy becoming evil? Has he yet committed a wrong?"

Doggedly determined to carry out his holy mission, Mr. E continued, "No, but if I kill him now, then he will never turn to evil. It is for the greater good!"

The wizard growled. "Then by your own rules, I should terminate your worthless existence," Harry intoned without the slightest sign of

regret, "for the darkness you spread is equally as vile as that which you strive to destroy."

In a desperate maneuver, the insane man once known as Erik used an underhanded thrust to embed his stake in the chest of his opponent. Much to his surprise, however, the wooden rod broke against his opponent's chest.

His skull-clad chest.

"Shall I do as you have done?" Harry smiled darkly at the man's slowly dawning look of horror. "Shall I stop the evil before it has been committed?"

"Wh-what are you?" Mister E stuttered.

The wizard's grin grew even more sinister. "I'm Mr. Black. Timothy Hunter is under my protection. Now answer honestly; shall I exterminate you by your own rules or are you a hypocrite?"

"I am a Guardian of truth," the hoisted man exclaimed as steadily as he could, "dedicated to protecting humanity from evil. The boy will be powerful - too powerful. It matters not whether he is a mage, scientist, or writer; his very footsteps will cause shudders throughout the universe. We should be responsible and stop this before it starts, before the power corrupts him completely," gasped Mr. E as Harry wordlessly hexed his airway shut.

"You were given this gift," Harry stressed the last word, "the ability to see what may happen, not what will. Such an accomplishment is beyond your power, which is something you seem to have forgotten. You are truly blind; not just physically, but spiritually."

The mage shook his head disgustedly. "I have promised to extract payment in full for your misdeeds, but I find you so far beneath contempt that I scarcely have the stomach to kill one such as you. You do not deserve the relief that such a quick end would allow. Perhaps I shall strand you here at the end of all things, unable to leave until you learn the error of your ways."

Harry snorted. "I wonder... who would dare speak on your behalf now?"

"I would," a voice answered from behind him.

The wizard looked over his shoulder at an eerily familiar figure with glowing eyes. The man – if you could call him such – was dressed in a trench coat and hat.

"You would speak for this one?" Harry demanded in a calm tone. "You, the one who treads the way of humans but never becomes close to them?"

"Yes," the Phantom Stranger replied, projecting both his confidence and his need to redeem his colleague.

Harry considered the wandering being's proposal for a time. "I will release him to you on two conditions," the dimension-traveling mage finally decided. "First, you and the ones who released Timothy Hunter to his care are to be his watchdogs, his keepers, for as long as he exists. Second, you all will see that he receives help, both to understand his gift and to understand what it is to be human. You will ensure that this betrayal here today does not happen again. Should these demands not be followed, you and the others who let Timothy accompany this garbage shall share this wretch's fate."

"I will see to it," was the quiet reply.

Drawing on the information he could temporarily access, Harry turned to the Stranger, eyes burning with conviction. "See that you do," he ordered. "Only for whom you are, am I being this lenient. I shall now take Timothy into my custody, to protect him to the best of my abilities. He shall be to me as my own. He shall be my family. So I have declared."

"So it is declared," the Stranger echoed in confirmation.

The man walked to his restrained colleague, and the pair disappeared as suddenly as the stranger first arrived.

His business concluded – for the moment, at least - Harry returned to the only other two beings still present at the End. "How is he?" the wizard asked.

"Steadily improving," Kara noted. "He should hopefully wake up soon. So, can we move him now?"

Harry nodded and, drawing one last time on Death's legacy, willed the three remaining objects in creation hundreds of millions of years into the past.

A/N: Thus concludes Chapter Eleven of Terminal Justice, weighing in at a decent 9,000 words. I had originally considered joining this chapter with the last update but decided that it would be too long. I managed to use a few more omakes in this chapter, namely Luinlothana's A Bit Further From Home; and Chris Hill's Justice Legion, New Generation.

Additionally, certain passages regarding Tim Hunter and the Trench Coat Brigade were lifted straight from The Books of Magic. I highly recommend reading the series if you have not yet done so.

Many thanks to James for proofreading this chapter, and to Chris for his background information on the various DCverse fixtures.

The exact extent of Harry's 'temporary abilities' at the end of the chapter will be addressed in the next chapter alongside the 'Ancient History' story arc. In the meanwhile, please feel free to speculate as to what side effects (if any) Harry accrued from reabsorbing his Trigon-generated 'twin'.

Thank you for your interest, and please remember to review.

Previous Chapter
Terminal Justice

Chapter 11: The Next Generation, Part Two
by Overkill

Next Chapter

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Chapter 12: New Beginnings

by Overkill

Next Chapter

Disclaimer: This is a cross between JLA (Season 5) and Rorschach's Blot's Make A Wish Story. Harry Potter is owned by JK Rowling and various publishers. Henchgirl, The Professor, and other such objects are Rorschach's creation. DC Comics own the Justice League and associated characters/plot devices. The lack of plot, however, can be attributed to me.

New Beginnings

Superman, who was anxiously standing watch over the training room as Steel scanned the energy signatures, immediately charged over when the strange bubble appeared again. Within a fraction of a second, he inventoried the new arrivals and discovered the shortage.

"Where's Kara?" he demanded.

The three time travelers looked at each other confusedly before Oliver took off his cap and scratched his head. "Uhm... about that..." he began.

"Okay, Ollie," Clark said in a deceptively mild tone once the emerald archer finished debriefing the Man of Steel, "let me see if I got this straight. You were all taken a thousand years into the future by a new group called the Legion of Superheroes, who were all but defeated by a small group of villains. You defeat these Fatal Five and start back home—but lose Kara in the process? And, to make matters even worse, this group of future heroes explicitly stated that Kara never returned?"

"Relax, Blue," Galatea interrupted, "Joe's with her. I'm sure they'll make their way back here—eventually."

"Eventually?" the last son of Krypton echoed. "Why eventually?"

The Argosian clone looked to the two green-clad men next to her. "I'll let you boys field this one, shall I?" she quipped. "I have to get ready for our night out tonight, Robin Hood," Galatea exclaimed as she sauntered back to her quarters, leaving the two Leaguers to

explain just why Kara might want to spend extra time with the absent mystic.

Fortunately for the two suddenly nervous men, the individuals in question suddenly reappeared before them—along with an unexpected addition.

"Are you alright, Kara?" Clark demanded as he crossed the slight distance between the groups. "Where did you go? And who is that?" he asked, pointing at the youth in Harry's arms.

The blonde girl nodded. "We're all fine," Kara reassured him. "Joe and I just had to go to the end of time and save our son from a nut job. Sorry it took so long."

Superman's eyes bugged, and the other two heroes present were not doing much better. "S-son?" he clarified.

"Yeah," she confirmed while looking at the still unconscious wizard. "Clark, guys, meet Tim. He's still out of it, Joe. You'd better get him to the med bay."

Harry nodded. "Well, you would be, too, if you had a large chunk of wood thrust through your heart," he commented as he shifted the child in his arms. "I'll catch up with you later?"

"You know it," the girl agreed. "Now go," she ordered.

The wizard smiled. "I'm going! I'm going!" he protested before Apparating away to the medical facility.

Kara shook her head. "Crazy goofball," she muttered good-naturedly. "One of the most powerful beings in existence, with nearly unlimited resources - and he still has the maturity level of a five-year-old."

Dismissing the issue, Kara focused on the three silent figures in front of her. "Listen, I've got to check with Mr. Terrific about getting Tim a room. What time did you and Dinah have in mind, Ollie?"

"How about two hours from now?" the archer suggested. "Dinah's still getting a few things planned out, and Tea just left to get ready."

"Sounds good," Supergirl nodded in agreement. "Meet you two at your place, then?" The man nodded in agreement. "Thanks again for the offer, Ollie. Bye, John, Clark. I'll see you back home later tonight."

The blonde girl flew off in the direction of the control booth, missing Clark's strangled, "S-son?"

How was he going to explain this to his folks?

After Kara procured a room for Tim from Mr. Terrific, she met up with Harry and the pair discussed the ramifications of their last mission. In the young woman's case, she also reminisced fondly of her technological birth world, and how she regretted that it was now frozen solid and lifeless. Her commentary sparked the beginnings of an idea in her partner's mind, who continued to speculate even as the recumbent youth began stirring from his unconscious state.

The pair stayed by Tim's bed until the youth finally woke completely, and took turns answering the plethora of questions that the newly immortal Argosian wizard issued. After receiving an explanation as to what had happened in the far future—and the rather far-reaching consequences of the pair's intervention—Harry offered to introduce the boy to his new stepsister. The former only-child's interest peaked at the suggestion so, after ensuring that he had recovered from his ordeal, Harry Apparated the two to Titan's Tower in Jump City.

Once the small family was reunited and introductions were made, Harry explained to his daughter about the advantages of training on Avalon. After listening to a disconnected encounter on the mystic isle between Tim and a few of its denizens, Harry was very eager to... settle accounts. Gaining the former half-demon's approval, Harry escorted the group to the hidden island and spent an endless second retraining the girl in general magical theory.

She was initially concerned at having lost her jeweled power focus, but Harry was thankfully able to provide a compatible substitute in the late Morgan le Fay's emerald broach. Additionally, Henchgirl and the Doctor had the foresight to include a couple of spare wands similar to his own for the new additions to the Black family, and Harry helped the young witch learn to use both foci to achieve her former level of training.

Interspersed with these tutoring sessions, Harry also initiated Tim into wizardry. Armed with one of the Black Ink wands, the elder wizard brought the boy up to the levels of his year mates at Hogwarts. Having shared several stories of his own childhood at the castle, the younger magician was eager to see the magical academy for himself.

In between the frequent mothering – and training—sessions with Nem, Harry also taught his eldest child Occlumency, rather than the emotionally stunting mental training that the monks of Azarath had employed. During their time together, the two developed an understanding of one another, and ultimately formed strong family ties. Raven, he learned, had a great affection for books—much like a bushy-haired acquaintance of his—and got along smashingly with Thena when she visited. While the purple-haired witch certainly had his flair for destruction when angered, the witch's greatest talents lay in Charms—much like his long-deceased mother.

Tim's inclinations, on the other hand, seemed to lean towards Transfiguration, reminiscent of Harry's own paternal progenitor. The child's interest in the art of changing things was only bolstered when his new father demonstrated shape shifting for him, assuming the form of a black wolf, a falcon, and finally, a small midnight-hued dragon.

Both father and son were surprised when dragon Harry pretended to breathe fire—and it worked. The elder wizard knew that he cast no flame spell—he had no more than visualized the fiery effects than they manifested. He ultimately concluded that his new elemental abilities could be attributed to Etrigan's 'gift'—much like the wintry powers from a certain Japanese yuki onna.

Harry also took the opportunity one afternoon to slip away from the group to complete his own private agenda, namely an unannounced visit to the so-called Queen of Avalon. 'It was amazing,' he later decided, 'how reasonable a monarch could be once you started pulling her palace down around her ears.' The Lady Titania was most conciliatory after the incident, offering the strange little egg back, with her most sincere apologies for her behavior. Content with the knowledge that she would never again harm his new family, Harry bid the faerie queen goodbye and returned to Ray and Nem's house.

An indeterminate time later, when Harry was satisfied that his children could fend for themselves – and Raven managed to memorize or duplicate most of Avalon's central library—the family returned to the real world. Tim, to whom Raven had recounted several of the Teen Titans' adventures, decided to visit Jump City for a short while before returning to the Hunter residence in Ravenknoll. With the boy's older stepsister offering to Side-Along Apparate him back to England after his visit, Harry and Kara found themselves alone.

With plenty of time to prepare before meeting up with Oliver and Dinah, Kara and Harry went their separate ways. The wizard had spent considerable time while on Avalon finalizing his plans for the girls' birthday present so, while the Argosian was on her way to change clothes, Harry paused time before putting his strategy into motion.

Once the wizard met up with the group, the three women—unsurprisingly—dragged him along on another shopping expedition. Despite Oliver's attempts at an explanation, Harry was still unclear on why the fairer sex persisted in browsing the displays when they had no plans of purchasing the goods.

Fortunately for the two males, however, this eventually came to an end and the out-of-uniform Leaguers set out for an afternoon of skiing. While Harry eventually mastered traditional skiing, he found the sport of snowboarding to be much more to his liking. In fact, it was with some regret that he returned his apparel and accompanied the group to their vehicle.

After Oliver and Dinah left to attend to business, the girls—chiefly Kara—invited Harry to the Kent farm for the family's private celebration. Having heard Kara's many glowing comments regarding the Weasley-ish farming couple, he quickly acquiesced and Apparated the two women to the location he memorized from the League Inner Council's private reports. The wizard soon learned firsthand the veracity of Kara's gossip as the aging couple welcomed them into their small but comfortable home. As Martha led Kara and Galatea away for one reason or another, Jonathan began discussing a wide range of topics with him, culminating in a rather lengthy speculation on the weather.

Thankfully, Harry was soon rescued by the noisy arrival of Clark Kent and Lois Lane. More specifically, the arrival itself was not loud—Clark had flown the woman to the farmhouse—but rather the discussion between the pair had grown raucous.

"I hope you're happy, Lois," Clark admonished the slight figure in his arms, unaware of his father and Harry observing them amusedly from the porch's rockers. "Thanks to you having to wait around for the museum staff to make that rubbing, now we're late!"

"Well, if you were so worried about being prompt, maybe you should have flown faster, Smallville!" the world famous journalist argued while waving a rolled up piece of paper at him. "Besides, the sooner we translate this mish-mash, the sooner I can get back to writing real news."

The not-so-mild-mannered reporter rolled his eyes in response. "Lois, the writing is in a formal dialect of ancient Aztec glyphs, dating back over eight centuries!" he protested. "Why didn't you just let the experts translate this thing?"

"Because Perry sent me to get the story, and that's exactly what I'm going to do – and no dead language is going to stop me!"

"Very commendable," Harry praised, startling the pair of journalists and drawing their gazes. "If you would like, I can translate the document for you."

"Mr. Black!" Clark blurted. "What are you doing here?"

"Kara invited me here to celebrate her and Tea's birthday with her family," the wizard answered. "And I believe that I've permitted you to call me Joe."

"You can read Aztec script?" Lois asked in a surprised tone.

Harry smiled. "I can read just about any language any sentient creature has ever written, Lois," he replied. "It's sort of a quirk of my particular... position. How about we go inside where it's lighter, and I can read through it for you right quick?"

"Of course, right this way," the elder Kent offered. "You know something, Joe? I can't place it right now, but you remind me of someone I knew once. Just out of curiosity, what sort of business are you in?"

Harry thought for a moment how best to summarize his position. "I'm something of a business major," the wizard admitted, "specializing in acquisitions. It requires a lot of international travel. I also do the occasional security job."

"That sounds interesting," Jonathan called back, missing his son's frantic motions for silence. "Business is good, then?"

The magician nodded ruefully. "I never seem to get a break, to be honest. There always seems to be some detail that I have to oversee."

"None of that for me, thank you very much," the farmer professed. "I don't care much for the rat race you young folks get up to these days, no Sirree Bob. Give me a nice quiet farm any day. You kids can use the table here," he beckoned. "I'll go see what's keeping the girls."

Harry sat down in one of the chairs closest to the Kent's floor lamp. "I like your father, Clark," the wizard commented as he unfurled Lois's paper. "Very down to Earth."

"Umm... thanks... Joe," the Kryptonian replied slowly.

The wizard just nodded in response and retrieved his glasses and dictation quill from his coat pocket. With the translating lenses perched atop the tip of his nose, Harry began reading the document aloud, the enchanted writing instrument jotting down the English translation on conjured parchment as he progressed.

"Done," he announced a few moments later. "Here's your copy in English. It's just their old rituals book for the underworld gods and, let me tell you; those Aztecs were one crazy bunch!"

"Thanks, Mr. B... Joe," Lois replied, accepting both the original and translated documents. "I like your... quill. I suppose one of those is easier to carry around than a voice-controlled word processor."

Harry smiled. "Quite. This little jewel was a present from a friend of mine. I've never been all that studious on a topic unless I had to know about it right then, and I think she planned for the Dictation Quill to somehow motivate me to research more." He shrugged in a 'what can you do?' manner. "Anyway, if that's everything, I'm going to go see if the others need any help."

"Yeah, thanks," the violet-eyed woman answered distractedly as she re-read the translated paper.

The wizard just shook his head at her work ethic and left the two to their business. After all, it was not exactly against all reason that the Kents kept a coffee pot brewing, now was it?

Once Harry had left, Lois handed Clark the parchment. "Take a look at this," she ordered, pointing to a particular section.

"Let's see...", he muttered. "Mictlantecuhtli... god of the dead and King of Mictlan, the lowest and northernmost section of the Aztec underworld... most prominent of several gods and goddesses of death and the underworld. Depicted as a blood-spattered skeleton or a person wearing a toothy skull."

"Not that. Read the next part," she instructed with a shudder.

Clark skipped ahead. "The worship of Mictlantecuhtli sometimes involved... ritual cannibalism? And he was depicted as wearing a necklace of human eyeballs?"

"Yeah, morbid much?" the world-famous reporter demanded.

"Well, in the Aztec world, skeletal imagery was a symbol of fertility, health and abundance," the Kryptonian reluctantly admitted. "They supposedly alluded to the close symbolic links between death and life."

The violet-eyed woman looked at her boyfriend askance. "You're just full of useless information, aren't you, Smallville? Where'd you pick up that little tidbit? Backpack across Mesoamerica?"

"Well, as a matter of fact-" Clark began, only for his partner to interrupt his reply.

"Never mind," she interjected, "I really don't want to know. Listen, you don't think that Mictel-something is-?"

"Stop right there!" Clark ordered firmly. "Don't even suggest it."

"But he translated it like it was old news to him," Lois insisted. "Don't you think it odd?"

"Yes, it is, and I don't care," he professed. "I'm not looking into Mr. Black's life any more than I already have."

"What if-"

"No, Lois," the Kryptonian said with a note of finality.

Just as he was finishing his nightly patrol and preparing to fly to his and Mari's apartment, John Stewart spotted a burglary. Sighing resignedly, the Green Lantern took up the chase. After a few minutes of pursuit, John finally got in front of the fleeing Gentleman Ghost and projected a giant catcher's mitt in front of the thieving spirit.

"I like it," the intangible thief commented, "very imaginative." He swung his cane around and easily sliced the construct in half. "But your ring is useless against me, Lantern," the ghost boasted as he resumed his flight.

The Green Lantern narrowed his eyes in frustration. "Then why are you running from it?" he demanded as he pursued the dead burglar.

He followed as best he could as the spook phased through buildings and vehicles. He suddenly got a mischievous idea and, as the ghost completely entered a moving truck, spun the vehicle around with a giant green hand. The criminal dazedly stumbled out of the truck's side, and John easily recovered the stolen property from the disoriented ghost.

"Mind the ion drive!" the British specter cautioned. "It's delicate equipment!" Regaining his feet, he rushed forward and sent a suddenly solid fist into John's chin.

"Right," the other man muttered, "I took you lightly. I won't make that mistake again!" He quickly captured the gray figure in a solid green bubble.

"I think you might," the spirit smugly disagreed as he again used his cane to disrupt the Lantern's construct with an influx of energy, sending the dark-skinned man once more to the ground. Stalking closer, he added, "If I were to give you another chance, I mean."

He raised the sharpened cane above his head in preparation to spear the downed Leaguer—only to have his weapon cut in half by a thrown axe. Both the living and dead man looked up to find the winged Carter Hall hovering above them. Before the gray felon could recover, the artificial Thanagarian ensnared the ghost in an energy net.

"He's all yours, GL," Hawkman offered as he touched down next to the other man. "The nth metal in this net—"

"—Has properties that interfere with dimensional shifting. I know," the other man interrupted shortly as he enveloped the figure with another energy bubble.

"Next time, Green Lantern," the Gentleman Ghost vowed, "I'll do you proper!"

John frowned at the captured fugitive and bounced the bubble a couple times. "Quite down in there!" he ordered gruffly.

"I've fought our Gentleman Ghost before," Carter mentioned in passing. "These intangible types can be tricky."

"Uh huh," the other man acknowledged disinterestedly.

"But he didn't stand a chance against the two of us," Hawkman finished smilingly.

"Look, Hawkman, I appreciate the help. Let's leave it at that."

"Well," the other man's demeanor seemed to dim, "give Shayera my regards." Turning around, he flew away, leaving John to transport the captured crook to a sufficient holding facility.

As the trio went their separate ways, none noticed that another 'intangible type' had witnessed their exchange.

After the Kent family plus two finished dinner, the two girls were presented with their gifts. After the elder Kents, Clark, and Lois had distributed their contributions, Harry produced the items he ordered from the Black Ink staff. "Happy birthday, you two," he wished as he passed each blonde girl a wrapped parcel. Smirking at their annoyance that he had the contents enveloped in lead before wrapping, he watched the last two Argosians tear the packages apart, revealing two nondescript, pale white outfits.

Seeing the several confused gazes such an unassuming present garnered, Harry took mercy on the group and instructed the pair to touch the outfits and envision what they were currently wearing. They did as he suggested and discovered that the contents could mimic any outfit they could imagine.

"Aside from conforming to your desires, those outfits are as invulnerable as you are and will provide at least some magical protection," Harry informed the group. "I recommend that you still work on your shields, though. I also added a few extra precautions for Kryptonite, red sun light... stuff like that."

After accepting their gratitude and watching as the outfits cycled through a wide range of colors and styles, the wizard announced, "I also have one other present I've been working on, though it's more for the whole family." He pulled a miniature door out of his pocket and enlarged it before sticking it to a vacant wall. Harry opened the new door to reveal a brightly lit landscape.

"If you'll follow me?" he beckoned the others, jarring them out of their dazes at having a magically linked door suddenly added to the normal house.

"That door's a portal?" Kara hazarded a guess. At the wizard's nod, she asked, "To where?"

Harry smiled mischievously. "That's part of the surprise. If you want to find out, you'll have to go through it, won't you?" he asked before doing just that.

"Well, I'm certainly curious!" Lois blurted before charging through the opened door. Her gasp of surprise quickly brought the five Kents to stand upon a rocky terrace overlooking a futuristic city.

Harry watched the other six stare in disbelief at the revealed scene.

"I-it's Argo!" Kara gasped, and Galatea looked nearly as perplexed.

"But that's impossible!" Clark protested. "Argo was frozen completely solid, and was spiraling out of the Krypton system altogether. Not to mention that the sun is supposed to be red."

The group looked to Harry, who nodded in confirmation. "You're right, Clark, things were that way. I had been racking my brain trying to decide what to get 'the girls who have everything' when Kara started reminiscing about life on Argo. I knew that she missed her first home, which was far more technologically advanced than Earth and... well, one thing led to another, and I considered bringing a few mementos back from Argo, but any of you could have done that, so..." he hesitated for a moment, "I decided to restore the planet—well, Argo City at least. I figured that the rest could be done later."

"You... undestroyed a planet—just like that?" Lois questioned bewilderedly.

Harry shook his head. "Oh, I'll admit that it was a lot of work. First, I had to get the planet back into orbit. I figured that, if one explosion could knock it out of alignment, another could put it back."

He chuckled at the memory of the Professor's unbridled joy at producing the first—and probably last—planet cleaner. The whole procedure was also something of a learning experience for him. While it may be true that conventional noises make no sound in a vacuum, Harry discovered quite accidentally that magically produced explosive forces great enough to redirect a planet are quite audible.

"But that would take years to shift back into position!" the female reporter protested. "Decades!"

Harry nodded in agreement before replying, "Longer than that, actually. That was another interesting challenge, but a little temporal

manipulation fixed that right proper." He shook his head to dispatch the thoughts.

"Anyway, as things I turned out," the wizard continued, "I was right, and the second explosion put Argo back into its proper orbit. After that, I had to thaw the city and clear the rubble. Then, I started warding the city—like creating the reverse of what that inventor did in Metropolis a few years back and filtering the red sunlight into yellow. After that, I added the same wards that Merlin put up on Avalon."

"Wait," Kara interrupted, "you mean Argo's outside of time now?"

He nodded. "Yeah, it helped loads during the reconstruction, and I left it up so that you all could visit here as long as you like without missing anything on Earth. Anyway, after all of that, I started recruiting help. I got Pam Isley released from the hospital, and she was kind enough to come out here and get the plant life on the road to recovery. That's her algae that's replenishing the atmosphere, by the way. Then I conscripted Raven's friend Cyborg to help me fix the computerized utilities and whatnot."

"Well, that explains all of those golden look-a-likes," Clark pointed out levelly while gesturing at the reprogrammed Cyborg drones.

"Yes, those were originally built by the HIVE academy as weapons," Harry supplied. "When Cyborg found out the scale of the project, we pulled those out of storage and he reprogrammed them to help clear out the mess." The wizard watched a small group of the autonomous workers for a few moments. "They're not nearly as personable as the original but, with their help, Cyborg projects that the entire planet can be repaired inside of a year. With the recovered data from the city's computerized central libraries, the workers should be able to put everything back exactly as it should be."

"This is-" Kara started to speak, but stopped herself and rubbed her eyes. "This is surreal. I can't believe you did all this."

Harry looked at the girl intently. "Is that a good disbelief, or a bad disbelief?" he asked.

His answer was two metapowered hugs that would have presented serious issues to most living creatures. As it was, however, Harry

returned Kara's and Tea's embraces as best he could and noted, "Ah, good disbelief."

The original Argosian snorted at his antics before finally releasing him. "You rebuilt a planet from the ground up—just because I made an idle comment?" Kara asked quietly.

"Well, technically, a few friends and I only rebuilt a third of the planet for you," Harry inserted dryly, "the rest is for Tea and Clark here."

The shorter blonde-haired woman punched his shoulder before looking back over the city she thought existed only in her memories. "Thank you, Joe," she finally said simply, her sister nodding in agreement.

He laid one arm around the girl's shoulders and corralled Galatea with the other, feeling that every bit of the heavily glossed over effort was worth it.

"You're welcome," he replied, before turning to Clark. "I'm sorry I couldn't do anything for Krypton, but it was destroyed beyond repair. I'm afraid that you're all that's left from that planet."

The Man of Steel smiled slightly before his expression changed, indicating that he was hard at thought. "You have the ability to shrink and enlarge items, correct?" he finally asked. At the wizard's affirmative nod, Clark continued, "Is there a limit to how many items you can do at once, or how large you could make something?"

Harry considered the question for a few moments. "None that I'm aware of. Why do you ask?"

"Does the name Kandor mean anything to you?" he asked in reply.

The query temporarily diverted Kara's interest from the rebuilt Argo City. "The capital city that Brainiac shrunk and stole before Krypton exploded?" she asked. "You found it?"

Clark nodded. "On our last trip out of the system," he explained. "After we stopped that runaway supernova a week or so ago."

"Ah, so you're wanting to transplant the city here?" Harry theorized.

"And the animals that I rescued from the collector," Superman added. Seeing the girls'—chiefly Kara's—eagerness to explore, he continued, "You'd better start the tour before the girls become hostile. Would you mind stopping by the Fortress later and seeing if there's anything you can do?"

"Not at all," Harry managed to get out before two anxious blonde-haired women dragged him towards the unoccupied city.

"You might want to ease up a bit there," Mari McCabe advised from her spot atop one of the Metrotower's treadmills. "Most guys don't go for the ripped, bulky look."

Shayera Hol rolled her eyes and lowered the barbell. "Just trying to maintain my girlish figure," she replied levelly. Looking over at the jogging Vixen, she clarified, "My girlish, girlish figure." The Thanagarian performed another repetition before asking, "And why does it always have to be about the guys, anyway?"

"Honey, it's always about the guys," the world-famous model declared. She paused for a moment before adding, "And, since I'll be away on that photo-shoot for a week..."

"Here we go," the redhead muttered with another eye roll.

"Well, I'm just surprised that you haven't made your move before now," Mari finished before retrieving her water bottle.

Shayera crawled out from under the weight rack and admitted, "I'm still trying to figure out the proper Earth protocol for this situation." Acting on a mischievous impulse, she continued, "It's not like I can just assassinate you in your sleep, or poison your water." She smiled dreamily. "I miss Thanagar."

The African woman ignored the quip. "I'm just saying—you think you have a shot, take it. I'm not worried."

"Mari, look. This isn't—"

"There you are!" John Stewart's voice interrupted Shayera's reply.

"Hey, Stranger!" Vixen greeted her boyfriend. "I was thinking, maybe we could skip the concert tonight... just stay in and order take-out. What do you say?"

"That'd be fine, Mari, what ever you want," the Green Lantern said distractedly. "Umm... I need to talk to Shayera for a sec."

"Oh... okay. I'll... see you tonight then," Mari acquiesced, before grabbing her towel and heading for the gym's exit.

"Hey, Mari," Shayera called. As the other woman turned around, the Thanagarian tossed her the forgotten water bottle.

"Thanks," Vixen said reflexively, before staring at the vessel suspiciously. She turned her gaze to the helpful redhead, who had crossed her arms and was smiling smugly.

Mari turned around and left the exercise room, throwing the bottle away as soon as she was out of sight. "Really not worried," she muttered to herself.

Once John was alone with the Thanagarian, he admitted, "I just ran into your boyfriend, Carter Hall."

"He's not my boyfriend," Shayera shot back as she fetched a towel from the rack.

"And he's still talking about you," he continued, unabated.

"Yeah, the whole 'reincarnated lovers from Ancient Egypt' bit," Shayera grumbled before chuckling slightly. "Carter's just a little... confused."

"He's an obsessed fanboy with wings and an axe," the Galactic guardian corrected bluntly.

"If I didn't know any better, I'd say you were-"

"Concerned," he interrupted. "The guy's a serious creep."

"I'm a big girl, John. You know I can take care of myself."

"Yeah, I just... just wanted to give you a heads up." He turned away and headed to the elevator. Stopping at the door, John added, "This isn't about us, Shayera," before entering the compartment and pressing the button for the ground floor. He quickly exited the building and made his way back to his apartment, and Mari.

Training in his formative years to rise before any other in the Dursley household ensured that Harry was awake many hours before even the 'early to bed, early to rise' Kent family. At least, that was the wizard's private excuse to explain his insomnia. If that failed, he was more than ready to blame his unique physiology for requiring little to no actual sleep, as he could easily replenish any losses from a wide variety of energy sources.

If he were honest with himself, however, Harry would admit that the ring that Henchgirl had convinced him to wear was the root of his recent sleep troubles. In the meager hours that he could force his frame to rest, he dreamt of the lives of random beings before their ends came and they passed on to the next state of being.

In many cases, he remained detached and unobserved—somewhat similar to the shared mental sensations between himself and the late Tom Riddle. In other cases, however, he found himself stopping time and looking around. In these instances, many seemed to notice him—some with fatalistic humor, others with dread. The children were the worst, Harry finally decided, as they were typically unable to comprehend what was happening. For each client, he tried to comfort the individual and assist them in making the transition.

'Death did that!' Harry mentally shook himself. 'Not me! I'm not Death! You can't just become the Grim Reaper by putting on a ring!'

Unfortunately, he had yet to succeed at convincing his subconscious of this fact, which led to his current ensconced position in the farmhouse's kitchen preparing breakfast for the family. His Occlumency meditations during his family's latest visit to Avalon had done no good, save organizing the downloaded thoughts, so he fell back to his secondary means of combating troublesome nightmares—remaining active.

As the different aromas filtered through the dwelling, the slumbering people began appearing. The wizard's culinary efforts drew several

curious stares, but none of those gathered seemed compelled to voice any questions.

'Perhaps,' Harry silently mused, 'they are still on information overload from last night.'

In any event, breakfast started off without a hitch as the group exchanged light banter. As usual when he was involved, however, things soon went awry. Jonathan reached for another omelet when he began complaining of heavy pressure on his chest. Immediately following, he exhibited signs of dizziness and profuse sweating.

Harry started to ask what was ailed the elder farmer before a small insight occurred to him and he nigh-instinctively cast the counter spell to the Triple Heart Attack curse. Thankfully, his intuition was correct, and the man began returning to normal almost immediately.

As he feared, his actions garnered the group's attention once more, and this time they appeared ready to question him.

"W-what was that?" Martha Kent asked waveringly. "What's wrong with Jonathan?"

"Nothing... now," the wizard replied. "Jonathan was having a triple heart attack," he added at her non-verbal prompting for more information.

"And you stopped it?" the matron hazarded a question.

Seeing no point in denying his obvious involvement, Harry turned his attention back to his breakfast and nodded once.

"Are you allowed to... intervene like that?" Lois questioned. "I mean, aren't there rules against this sort of thing?"

He downed the rest of his orange juice before leaning back in his chair with a sigh. "Technically, yes, there are," the wizard admitted. "Of course, the same rules say that none of you should have any concrete proof that I even exist." He shrugged. "What can I say? I've never been all that good at following the letter of the law, anyway. And... I must say that I've grown rather fond of all of you."

"Well, I for one can't thank you enough!" Martha Kent exclaimed. "You're not going to get in trouble for this, are you?"

Harry waved off her concern. "Eh, I've racked up enough brownie points over the years to get away with a few little... nudges like that," he said. "Besides, sometimes good guys just need a break. You know what I mean?" the wizard asked, looking over at Jonathan who had suddenly paled.

The conversation petered out shortly following a flurry of expressed gratitude, finally culminating with Lois laying some subtle—and not so subtle—hints at gaining his 'exclusive'. Harry managed to stall her until the group separated to begin their day, with Clark flying the woman back to Metropolis and away from him. Kara and Tea, it seemed, both had early morning appointments on the Watchtower, so the immortal magician exchanged farewells and set off on his motorbike to wherever the road took him.

The Green Lantern had no sooner fetched the morning paper and a cup of coffee than Mari swept into the apartment's spacious bedroom/living area, arms loaded with clothes. "The photo shoot runs a week in Milan," the model greeted her boyfriend as she completed packing another suitcase, "maybe another day in Rome."

"Let me get that," John offered, laying the paper on the table and lugging the luggage towards the door—after intimately greeting the smartly dressed Vixen, of course.

"You can kiss, you can schlep – I think men are just wonderful," Mari McCabe purred.

The Lantern smiled slightly and replied, "I'll miss you."

"You better," the totem-bearing woman ordered impishly.

Dropping the latest bag outside of the door, he asked, "Do you have time for breakfast?"

"The car's downstairs," she explained. "Just an English muffin." The toaster suddenly ejected two of the aforementioned items. "Perfect!" she said happily.

With some difficulty, John cleared a way for his girlfriend to leave. "Sure you've got everything?" he asked sarcastically while pointing to the obscene amount of luggage now cluttering the hallway.

"You can let the driver up for those," Mari informed her anxious beau, who was wondering how many trips it would take to ferry the parcels—even with a power ring. "I'll call you every day," she added, choosing to ignore his sigh of relief and kissing him goodbye.

"Checking up on me?" he asked bemusedly.

She rolled her eyes. "Go finish your coffee." Devouring the muffins on her way to the elevator, Mari hesitated as she caught a flicker of movement in the hall's shadows. Dismissing it as her imagination, she entered the elevator and selected the lobby. As the doors shut, however, she could plainly see a shadowy form coalesce outside of her apartment's door.

A rhinoceros-powered charge made short work of the shut elevator doors. "Gotcha!" she cheered as she bulldozed the corporeal shadow through the wall and into her apartment.

"Get away!" the shadow man growled before phasing out from underneath her. "This doesn't concern you!"

John, already shifted into his work uniform, used his ring to force the specter against a brick wall. "What do you want with Vixen?" he demanded.

"Guess again," Shadow Thief smugly rejected as he slipped out of John's construct. "And don't bother shining a bright light on me," he added upon reforming, "hasn't worked in months."

The two Leaguers made several attempts to capture the entity, all of which failed. After defeating Vixen's latest attack, the shade grabbed her by one ankle and threw her into the couple's television set, temporarily stunning her.

"You just bought yourself a world of hurt, Shadow Thief!" the Green Lantern yelled. He charged the invader recklessly and was finally stopped as the shadow suffocated him into nothingness.

Vixen recovered just as John fell. Crying out, she attempted to charge the pair as well, with equal success. This time, the shade stopped the woman by flinging a loaded bookcase upon her.

"Last warning, Zoo Candy!" the Shadow Thief cautioned. "This is between me, and the Green Lantern, and that Thanagarian harpy! Stay out of it!" Before Mari could free herself, the specter fled the apartment through the window, taking the unconscious Lantern with him.

Finally escaping the pile of books, she dashed to the window in a futile effort to track her kidnapped boyfriend—to no avail. Recalling the shade's departing comment, Mari tapped her communicator.

"Shayera!" the African woman cried. "He's got John!"

"What?" the Thanagarian replied confusedly. "Vixen, what's happened?"

"The shadow thief attacked us!" Mari supplied in a more level tone. "He took John!"

Once the elder Kents were alone, Martha put her hands on either side of her immobile husband's head. "Jonathan, what is it? Are you having another attack?"

He blinked and seemed to return to reality. "Did you say something, Martha?"

"What's wrong, Sweetheart? You've been distracted ever since your attack earlier. Are you still having problems?"

He shook his head. "No, Martha, it's not that. I knew when they first got here that Joe and I had met before; I just finally remembered where it was."

"Well? Don't keep me in suspense," she urged.

"Back in '43, when I was in the Pacific a bunch of us were on an extended recon mission," Jonathan began. "It was just getting dark, and we had already set up camp for the night. Anyway, it turned out that we were closer to the enemy than we first believed, because a hostile expeditionary force fell upon us just as the light faded. They

had us outnumbered four to one and outgunned to boot, but we were determined to make them earn it."

The aging farmer shook his head in disbelief. "Martha, it's been six decades, and I still can't believe it. More than a few of us started praying about then, but just as they were about to take us out, the whole bunch was mowed over by a flurry of gunshots. This one soldier—a real hardcore, spec ops warrior – gunned down the entire contingent in a matter of seconds. When the dust settled, not even one of us had taken a hit. After the firefight, we approached the new arrival and exchanged IDs. He was a wiry one, dressed all in black with face paint to match, and was packin' some serious hardware. Anyway, this guy told us that we were basically off course and surrounded by the enemy. It was after dark with almost no moonlight, the hostiles were sure to have heard the gunfire, and since this was before modern night vision goggles, we were pretty much stuck—or so I thought."

Jonathan took another sip of his coffee before he continued the tale. "Our new friend said that he knew a way out, though, and we were desperate enough to trust him. He led us through the wilderness for hours while dodging every patrol—even carried our extra gear when it started to slow us down—and, just before dawn, we emerged from the woods about an eighth of a mile from our outpost. The others broke into a run for the base, but something made me stay. While I was helping him unload the extra gear, I asked him what made him stick his neck out for a bunch of idiots like us. And you know what he said?"

"No, Jonathan. What?"

"He said, sometimes good guys just need a break."

Martha struggled to make sense of this revelation. "Honey, that's just a coincidence. There must be thousands of slender men with black hair and green eyes."

He snorted. "Martha, when we first went out to meet him, do you know how he introduced himself?"

She shook her head negatively.

"He presented himself as Sergeant Black."

"And he said I was next?" Shayera questioned after she and Mari exited the Javelin.

Vixen shrugged. "Unless you know any other Thanagarian harpies," she admitted. "Anyway, I figured that since your boyfriend's here—"

"Not my boyfriend!" Shayera interrupted firmly.

"Since Hawkman's tangled with this guy before," the African model corrected her self, "he might be able to give us a lead." The two women stopped at the suspiciously ajar door. "What's wrong with this picture?"

Shayera shrugged before pushing the door the rest of the way open and stepping inside. Vixen followed, and the pair made their way through the darkened.

"Hello?" Mari called after a few moments without sign of anyone.

There was still no answer, and the two Leaguers pressed forward, arriving in a spacious, sky-lit dinosaur exhibit. "Carter?" Shayera shouted in hopes of gaining the absent man's attention.

A faint moan from the other side of the room responded, and the women rushed forward. Both Leaguers scanned the room but could find no source of the barely audible noise.

"Welcome, Shayera," a smug voice announced from overhead. The women looked up to find an unconscious John Stewart suspended from the ceiling. The shadows next to the man coalesced into the form of his abductor.

"We've been waiting for you," the Shadow Thief added. "Thank you for saving me the trouble of tracking you down."

Shayera took to the air and attempted to pummel the shade with her mace—which was rather unsuccessful due to her foe's ability to become intangible.

While she was distracting the opposition, Vixen borrowed spider powers, climbed up to the restrained Lantern, and began cutting the captive Lantern free. Unfortunately for Mari, however, the Shadow

Thief dealt Shayera a stunning blow and was now free to send the African superhero crashing into a freestanding dinosaur skeleton.

"I warned you before to stay out of this," the specter informed Mari's unconscious and buried form. Morphing his hand into a blade, he added, "See what happens to naughty girls?"

"Get away from her!" a male voice ordered as Carter Hall flew into the room and body-checked the now tangible shadow into the far wall.

"Hawkman!" the Shadow Thief nearly purred. "The cast is complete." Morphing his arm into a full-fledged sword, he began exchanging blows with the transformed Thanagarian.

The ruckus woke Shayera, who joined in the fight. Unfortunately, even the combined efforts of the two winged Leaguers were unable to overcome their adversary, and the Shadow Thief rendered the pair unconscious yet again.

When they were once more cognizant, Shayera, John, and Carter found themselves bound in a circle, facing an Egyptian ankh.

Noticing his captives' wakefulness, the shade announced, "Of course, you all recognize the Absorbicron. Despite your best efforts to bury me alive, I managed to retrieve it."

Unimpressed, John demanded, "Where's Vixen?"

"Out of the way," their captor informed. "She's not part of this." Sending out three tendrils, the Shadow Thief grabbed one arm from each prisoner and drew them towards the jeweled artifact.

"That machine is Thanagarian technology," Shayera grunted as she found her captor's hold. "It's a telepathic database, more advanced than anything on Earth—and it's broken!"

"She might be right," Carter agreed. "When I touched it before... the feedback..."

"Hush now," the specter ordered before yanking their limbs into contact with the device. "Watch and learn."

The minds of the four connected individuals were instantly drawn into the device, as the Shadow Thief selected the device's recollection of the first Thanagarians to visit Earth, eight millennia previous.

Harry was riding along the freeway when his newly awakened trouble intuition—which the Sunnydale set jokingly referred to as 'Slay-dar'—urged him to take the next exit. He did so, and found himself riding through Midway City's downtown district. Everything seemed perfectly normal, however, and he was prepared to chalk it up to a fluke—until he passed the city's museum and caught sight of a League Javelin parked out front.

Pulling up underneath the jet, the wizard disembarked the motorbike and entered the building. The dark interior posing no difficulty to his vision, Harry followed Shayera and Mari's recent scents to a Jurassic exhibit. There, he found an unconscious Vixen trapped beneath a collapsed dinosaur skeleton. A brief exertion of inhuman strength had the orange-suited woman free, and an Ennervate had her awake and demanding what had happened.

"It appears that you impacted this skeleton, the collision knocked you out, and then the pile of bones fell on top of you," Harry speculated.

"Where's John?" Vixen asked anxiously.

Taking another sniff and detecting another scent reminiscent of Shayera's, he answered, "John, Shayera, and I believe Carter Hall went that way," he gestured further down into the museum.

"The Shadow Thief attacked us," she explained. "We have to help them." The dark-skinned woman attempted to suit actions to words, but she wavered dangerously and nearly fell before Harry could catch her.

"I will assist the others," Harry promised. "You are in no condition to get into another fight."

"I'm not sitting this one out," she informed. "I'll be fine."

Harry rolled his eyes before sweeping the woman into his arms. "I swear, you bloody stubborn women will be the end of me. Hold on," he ordered as he ran in the direction his nose indicated.

The two arrived in another spacious exhibit, where they found the three Leaguers and one corporeal shadow staring unblinkingly at a golden Egyptian artifact.

"Why aren't they moving?" Mari questioned.

"That relic," Harry supplied. "Your shadowy friend is using it to entrance them somehow. Let's intervene, shall we?" Sending a binding spell to deal with the opposition, Harry Vanished the Leaguers' bonds and—shifting Vixen to one arm— Summoned the object of their apparent fascination out of their reach.

His breath hitched as the strange device dragged his mind into a nighttime scene. Recognizing the device as a type of pensieve—except that he was bodiless and subject to a foreign point-of-view—Harry relaxed a little, now understanding why he was no longer supporting Vixen or standing in a museum in Midway City. No sooner had this realization dawned on him than his awareness moved to an oddly familiar dwelling in the distance—just as a robed figure blasted its door into oblivion.

His involuntary viewpoint moved forward as the invader dropped its hood, revealing the aged countenance of a pre-resurrection Tom Riddle. Harry had a sinking feeling that he knew exactly where and when the device was displaying, a feeling that was confirmed as he was brought face-to-face with no other than James Potter.

As if watching a choreographed movie, Harry was powerless to stop the reenactment of the scene he first recalled during exposure to Dementors. His father and Voldemort faced off and, after a brief exchange of spells, the self-styled dark lord stepped over James Potter's corpse and pursued the redheaded witch up the small home's staircase.

Just as he dreaded, the intangible television view changed again, this time showing Lily Potter standing in what appeared to be a nursery, while holding an infant version of himself in one arm. Moments later, the younger version of the so-called Dark Lord appeared in the doorway and accosted his mother. After a brief

exchange—which the Dementors assured would remain ever seared into his conscious memory—a Killing Curse struck his mother down, leaving his infant self to Voldemort's less-than-tender mercies.

All of this, Harry expected. What he did not anticipate, however, was the arrival of another robed figure. The latest entrant was both extremely tall and thin and, Harry presumed, male—though neither face nor hands were visible. Strolling almost casually through the suddenly frozen scene, the almost wraith-like being approached his mother and stretched out one skeletal hand.

Harry was quick to note that, unlike most applications of the term 'skeletal' in regards to anatomy, this particular instance referred to the presence of bone only. He watched morbidly as the apparent personification of Death seemingly plucked a shining silvery mist out of his mother's body and, after a moment of thought, released it to float upwards out of sight. The voyeuristic mage was so shocked at the graphic transition that he nearly missed Death's approach towards his infant self.

The world jumped back into motion, and the dark wizard gloated for a few moments before casting the same Unforgivable on the baby that had extinguished the parents. As Harry expected, the green curse bounced off the child's forehead, leaving nothing more than a glowing green lightning bolt upon his brow. What he did not expect, however, was for the reflected death curse to ricochet through Death as he was attempting to collect Harry's infant soul. The robed figure glowed green momentarily before the aura surrounded the baby as well. An instant later, the tall figure disappeared.

The reflected Unforgivable—which was apparently altered as it passed through the former Death Incarnate—struck the so-called Dark Lord right in the face and—for lack of a better word—vaporized him. The magical backlash created an explosion sufficient to level most of the house, leaving the dwelling nothing more than flaming rubble of its former self.

The grown Harry suddenly found himself standing in the Midway City Museum once more. He was still holding Vixen in his left arm and the alien memory device in his right hand. Blinking rapidly, he turned his head to apologize to the woman for his inattention and

noticed that she was completely unmoving. In fact, he quickly noticed that nothing was moving aside from himself.

Groaning, he muttered, "That's just great! This bloody thing's frozen time!"

"Actually," a cheerful voice said from beside him, "that would be my doing."

He spun to look at the one who had somehow managed to sneak right next to him without him being aware.

The wizard found next to him a pale skinned, black haired girl, who looked to be in her late teens. Her short hair was in disarray, and Harry momentarily wondered if he was somehow related to her. Rather, he did until he noticed that the girl's eyes were completely black. In fact, her right eye was even surrounded by a strange symbol—the 'Eye of Horus', a memory that was not his supplied. The slight, pale form was dressed in Muggle clothing, wearing an abbreviated black top and matching black denim jeans. The only color to be seen on her person was the silver belt around her waist and the silver ankh hanging from a chain around her neck.

Harry squinted at the cute girl for a moment before another buried memory rose to his conscious mind. "Tel?" he asked. "Teleute?"

The gothic girl smiled. "Ah, so you do remember. That's really peachy keen, makes my job a lot easier!"

"I'm not sure I follow," Harry cautiously admitted to the primary incarnation of Death for their present universe. "Am I dead or something? Does this have anything to do with this ring I received?" he asked, pointing to the article.

The girl cocked her head to one side. "You've still not accepted it, have you?" she stated more than asked. "Let me put it simply. You are Death—or, at least, one of them. I'm the Chief Death for this universe, and you're my opposite number in your home dimension. The Union sent me to do your initiation—which apparently, no one bothered to do before now."

"Wait a minute!" Harry protested. "There's got to be some mistake! I'm not Death! Err... a Death. I mean, sure, a whole bunch of people

think that I am, but I'm not! I'm just a wizard!" At the girl's amused look, he grudgingly added, "And a few other things, but I'm pretty sure that 'Grim Reaper' isn't one of them."

"Hate to break it to ya, kiddo," the female Death disagreed jovially, "but the ol' bonehead passed the buck to you a long time ago."

"I've met the Death for my universe, though," he protested. "Tall, skeletal, speaks with a Jamaican accent, substitute teaches at a public school—"

Teleute nodded. "That's Grim," she supplied. "He's your number one, so to speak. Grim's been catching any of the cases that would have normally required your personal attention. Of course, he's covering everything now; with you out of the dimension, your Will isn't keeping the system going, so he's having to fill in."

"Come again?"

"Oh, sorry," she smiled sheepishly. "I forgot that you're playing catch-up. See, only a small percentage of people need our personal attention—mostly just those souls whose final destination are unclear for whatever reason. The vast majority handle the transition themselves—which, of course, is facilitated by Death's Will."

Seeing Harry's blank look, the female Death tried a different method. "Think of it like breathing. When we attend to a client personally, it's kinda like consciously breathing; when we just let a soul leave its host unattended, it's more like the autonomous breathing you do when you're asleep."

Harry nodded. "Alright, I can understand that—but why wait until now to tell me about all this? I mean, if I really was a Death since I was a year old, shouldn't someone have explained this before now?"

The gothic girl chuckled weakly. "Yeah... about that. It seems that there was a... miscommunication about the exchange. See, right after your predecessor... elected you, a soul was collected and the system resumed. I think everyone just assumed that it was business as usual and you had the 4-1-1. Sorry about the confusion."

"But... this can't be!" he protested. "You can't just accidentally become Death... err, a Death! It just isn't possible!"

She smiled. "Yeah, that's what we thought. Turns out you were already predisposed towards this sort of thing. Orcus's little... mishap just sort of jump-started things a bit."

"You mean my dumb luck?" Harry asked.

Teleute scratched her head for a minute. "Yeah, something like that," she finally admitted, thinking it an odd way of referring to his heritage.

He just shook his head at his typical fortune. "So... I really am an incarnation of Death?"

"You know, I read over your file before I popped in," she admitted, "real classic stuff. Didn't you ever wonder how you kept surviving all those ordeals which would have killed a normal human, or how all those dark wizards and creatures died in suspicious 'accidents'?"

Harry shrugged as best he could with the frozen burden in his arms. "I just accounted it to chance."

"It was, in a roundabout way. As near as we can figure, you've been unconsciously tapping your Death powers and using them to... err... collect the 'bad guys'—at least some of the time. Apparently, a few of them really were just dumb luck."

"Are you sure this isn't a really bad joke, or a mistaken identity, or something?" Harry pleaded.

"Sorry, Sport," she negated, "you're a card-carrying member of the Death Union. On behalf of all the boneheads, welcome to the club. Meetings are held every century or so."

"Right," Harry accepted resignedly. "So, what does that entail, precisely?"

"Well, I'd imagine that the little jeweled tutor you're wearing will eventually brief you on all the necessary details," Teleute informed while pointing to his new ring. "To answer your question, though, there's the obvious freeing souls bit and orchestrating their transition to their appropriate destination—you know, a particular afterlife or reincarnation. Unless it's a special situation, we normally just farm

those jobs out to whatever death god holds the most valid claim—like if the client worshipped a particular god's pantheon or if there's a contract in effect."

She made a dismissing gesture. "Aside from that, there's the usual range of cosmic powers: exercising our wills directly on the universe, teleporting across the universe and dimensions, altering our appearance, true Immortality—well, except for Orcus, but he was ready to leave this plane anyway—resurrection—although there's a lot of red tape on that last one, take my word for it. Oh yeah, we can also ignore little things like walls or magic spells that stand between us and our goals when we attend a client, because Death has existed for billions of years. That makes us more... real than just about anything else in existence—like, say, a few centuries-old castle wall. Most people also ignore us, unless we insist that they acknowledge us. Does any of this sound slightly familiar?" she quirked a grin.

The former wizard just huffed at his smug colleague. "Yeah, yeah," he grumbled, before a thought struck him, "but if I've been a Death since I was a baby, why did none of those abilities ever show? I've picked them up piecemeal on my trips, but you're saying that I should have always been able to do that stuff."

The girl smiled again. "Yeah, well, you didn't know you had access to those powers, now did you?"

Harry blinked. "Are you saying that I went through over fifteen years of scraps without the aid of any extraphysical powers whatsoever... because I didn't know about them?" he asked dangerously.

"Pretty much," she nodded in agreement, not at all fazed by her less-than-pleased colleague.

"Of course," he muttered, "now we're getting back into familiar territory." He snorted. "Well, that certainly puts a new and ironic spin on the whole 'power he knows not' bit."

Harry frowned as a sudden thought occurred to him. "Wait a second. You said that I couldn't consciously use any Death powers because I didn't know about them, right?"

"Yep," Teleute confirmed, "that's about the size of it."

"Then how were all those weird accidents with the Death Eaters my fault?" he demanded.

"Well... you're aware that belief is a powerful thing, right? Perhaps even the most powerful force in the world?"

He tilted his head to the side in contemplation. "Well, an exceedingly annoying old wizard that I know has always maintained that love was the single greatest force in the world."

"They are sometimes interchangeable," she allowed. "Now, you've got quite a few beings around the multiverse believing that 'Mr. Black' is a physical embodiment of Death. That much belief focused on one concept is bound to have an effect after a while."

Harry blinked repeatedly as a vein on the side of his neck became rather well pronounced. Speaking carefully, he replied, "Do you mean to say that I started reaping evil souls without even realizing it—because people believed that I could?"

The girl-shaped entity at his side remained nonplussed. "Pretty much, yeah," she agreed.

He suddenly started as another worrisome thought crossed his mind. "What about all that other stuff that they've said about me?" Harry asked. "You know, all those other cases of mistaken identity?"

She shrugged. "I tried asking my brother Destiny about that before I dropped by," Teleute admitted. "All he did was clutch that book of his tighter to his chest and laughed oddly. I think he's a little miffed about that business with Trigon and his daughter—not to mention that young wizard Tim Hunter that you took off my books. Nice job, by the way—real classy stuff there."

Harry smiled. "Thank you. I do my best," he acknowledged modestly. "So... I'm pretty well stuck with this Death business then?"

"I'd think so," she agreed. "At least until you managed to find a successor."

"And you're saying that, because of this, I can't die?"

"Umm... sorta. See, you can't really die like a mortal and go to the afterlife or anything like that. That body you inhabit can be destroyed, of course. You'd have to arrange for a new one if that happened and you wanted to socialize with the mortals again."

"We can actually do that?" Harry demanded incredulously.

The girl nodded. "Yeah, I drop in for a day every century or so to live life as a human. I was called... Didi, I think, the last time. I got to eat a hot dog, and ride in a taxicab, and a friend and I even saw a concert. Bill did the same thing once, but I think he's out of the mood now. I think being separated from the really cool Death powers turned him off to the whole 'living as a human' thing."

"Huh?" Harry eloquently inquired.

"When we take on human form—or human-ish, in your case—we're sort of... limited. It's kinda difficult to explain," she attempted to elaborate. "We're still us, we just can't do the big stuff."

"Big stuff? Like what?"

"Well, most of the stuff I mentioned earlier. We'll always have some influence on a local area. Take what happened to you this morning. You could sense that nice farmer Jonathan Kent's heart attack as it happened and then instinctively stop it—but you didn't have any advance notice that there was a problem. Or that Mrs. Taylor who grew those lovely roses in her garden in Nebraska died of the exact same thing two minutes later."

"So... no sudden awareness of every living thing in the universe or being able to locate anyone instantly, then?"

"Now you got it!" Teleute said encouragingly. "That sort of thing just can't be done from this plane."

Harry grew increasingly worried. "So, does that mean I can't stay in this... plane, anymore? Since I have this job to do, I mean."

"I wouldn't think so," she finally replied. "Most of the time, things run smoothly without our intervention. If there was a problem, though, you would have to physically go resolve it."

Teleute smiled. "I can understand why you want to stay amongst them," she confided. "There's more...awe from a human perspective, isn't there? Life seems so much more interesting from the mortal point-of-view. Sure, we can ascend, or become 'enlightened', or transcorporeally migrate upstairs—whatever the appropriate term is for it these days—but things just seem to lose their wonder from there."

"Anyway," she continued, "you'll eventually figure out the limitations. For now, just expect to keep the abilities you already had with some new insight occasionally thrown in for good measure."

"Right..." Harry muttered distractedly. "So, our physical bodies can die, but we can't... right?"

"Well, if you go far enough up the hierarchy, sooner or later you'll find someone that could destroy you, I suppose," the female Death allowed. "Aside from that, though, you'd be surprised what you can live through."

Deciding to blatantly change the topic, he asked, "Okay then... you said something about exercising our wills on the Universe? Is that good for whenever we want, or does that count as a big thing, too?"

Teleute smiled. "Sorry, kiddo, but we have rules, too. You can get away with teleportation or localized temporal manipulations down here, but we try to keep the rest to a minimum. You can't use Union resources to, say, move a planet out of a decaying orbit or something."

Harry scratched the back of his head. "Ahh... you heard about that, then?"

She laughed briefly. "It was kind of hard to miss, what with the debris from the blast that you sent flying. Did you know that a couple of the larger rocks actually hit a pirate star cruiser a few systems away just before it vaporized a passenger ship?"

The new Death groaned. "No, I didn't. Please don't tell me that the survivors know where the rock originated."

"Look on the bright side—no one there knows any of the details...yet. Just between the two of us, how did you do it?"

Harry shrugged. "I just asked a friend of mine to scale up an explosive device that he's fond of making. The rest was completely out of my hands."

"You set off a giant bomb—in space—to move a planet?"

Harry looked off to the side. "Yeah, pretty much. Why?"

"No reason. Do you have any other questions?"

"One. Just out of curiosity, how would one do the time control or dimensional travel spell that you mentioned?"

"It's really just an application of Will, rather than a Wizarding spell," she corrected. "If my info's right, you can ask your ring for the exact procedures. The basic idea is that you envision what you want to happen in your mind, and then Will it into being. No magic wands or incantations—just results. Travel between the living dimensions is a cinch, even with passengers. Now, if you wanted to traverse into one of the heavenly or hell realms, then the process is a little more complicated."

Harry blinked. "Wait a minute. Are you telling me that I could visit the Afterlife?"

The girl shrugged. "We're the custodians of the Universe, Harry. Joe. Which is it, anyway?"

"I haven't really decided if 'Harry' will ever resurface," Harry said with barely concealed impatience.

"I'll stick with 'Joe' then," she decided. "I think that's a really keen name. Now, where was I?"

"Custodians of the Universe," he prompted.

"Oh, right. So anyways, we're like the night crew. We come in, clean up the messes, and get everything put away nice and neat. That means that we have access to everywhere that might need cleaning, as well as the supply closets and whatnot—that'd be all those other planes like Heaven, Hell, Sheol, Olympus, Asgard, the Elysian Fields, Tartarus, yada yada yada. When everything's over, we put

the chairs up on the tables, turn out the lights, and lock the doors on our way out."

"So I could really meet my parents and godfather, or take someone along to see them?"

"Eventually," she admitted. "It's one of the perks of the job. We can also hop over the Source Wall, or the Infinity Well—whatever they call it these days. Anyway, it's a font of knowledge and can give a person all knowledge on a subject if she asks the right questions. Now, dimensional travel's easy if you stay on the same plane—like the mortal plane, for instance. But like I said, it gets tricky when you try to cross over into the afterlife, and there's a bunch of rules regarding stuff like that—but... yeah, you could do that."

Harry looked contemplative. "Maybe this won't be as bad as I first thought."

"Most things aren't," Teleute commented. "Anyway, we good?"

"Yeah. We're good."

"Cool. So... your ring should be able to answer most any question you'll have. Check in with Grim once you go back home, and he'll get you set up there. If you need one of us, we can all be summoned by an ankh—it's a Death thing—which reminds me..." The girl reached into her jeans pocket and produced a golden ankh. "This belonged to your predecessor; now it's yours. In case you didn't know, supplicants can get your attention if they know the right procedure to use on one of those. You have any other questions?"

"Not at the moment," Harry admitted while trying to gain some perspective from all the new information he had just learned. "Thank you for your time. If there's something I can do for you sometime, just let me know."

"Hey, it only took a second," she joked. "Now that you mention it, though, there is a little something you can do for me."

"Oh?" he asked, more than just a little suspiciously.

"Yeah. I need to go out of town for a bit, and the regular subs are busy," Teleute explained. "Would you mind the shop for a few days?"

"Are you serious?" Harry demanded. "I'd love to help, but I don't know how."

She waved off his concern. "Oh, you'll be fine. The job's pretty much instinctual, anyway. Just don't leave the dimension before I get back, and be sure to handle any situations that come up as quick as you can. Thanks, Cutie! Buh bye!"

Before Harry could speak, the diminutive Death had vanished, leaving him standing in the frozen moment with Vixen in his arms and a slew of conundrums on his mind.

"That's right, folks, it's just another day in the life of the universe's spittoon," Harry muttered. "Well, now would be a really good time to know how to cancel this Death Time Pause thing." He snorted. "Ask the ring', she says. Yeah, right! Oh, Ring, be a dear and tell me how to restart time, would you?"

A sudden cold pulse on his ring finger accompanied a brief pressure on his mental barriers, the sensation bringing back memories of Dr. Schlock's machine. The impression quickly faded, leaving the newly initiated Death Incarnate comprehending precisely what Teleute had done to the temporal field.

He stared at the opal-and-silver band speculatively. "Oh, I get it. You're like the Lantern Corps' power rings!" Harry spoke aloud. "Too bad you can't carry on a conversation like them, though."

"I am fully capable of speech," a sourceless and sexless voice announced.

The former wizard blinked again before smiling. "Wicked! Why haven't you spoken up before now?"

"This is the first time you requested that I do so," the ring replied in a smug tone.

Harry glared at his hand. "Right. This will definitely be helpful, but most people are going to wig out if they hear a talking ring—no offense. Can you communicate any more discretely?"

The new Death felt a brush on his Occlumency shields, and tentatively lowered the outermost defenses. 'We can also converse in this manner,' his circular tutor announced into his mind.

"Excellent," Harry breathed, feeling a little more at ease with his sort-of-new responsibilities. "So, do you have a name?"

'The maker most recently referred to me as Hal,' the device replied silently.

"Hal"? Why 'Hal'?"

'It is supposedly traditional.'

"Okay then, Hal," Harry decided, "let's get this show on the road." After stowing the large golden ankh-shaped device in his coat pocket and attaching the smaller facsimile to his lapel, the young Death followed the ring's instructions and the world suddenly resumed from stasis.

The three kneeling Leaguers quickly discovered that the table had turned in their favor and scrambled to their feet, putting a healthy distance between the still-trapped Shadow Thief and themselves.

"You know something, John?" Harry rhetorically asked in a light tone, causing the three metahumans to spin towards him. "Here I am, involved in yet another bizarre League matter, and Kara is nowhere in sight. I do believe that you are my bad luck charm, after all."

"Umm... sorry about that," the resident Green Lantern offered, before noticing Harry's passenger. "Mari, are you alright?"

"I'll be fine, Boo," Vixen answered. "I just got a little bump on the head, and Mr. Black here thinks that I can't walk anymore."

Harry glanced down at the woman. "Well, it's not everyday a guy gets to carry around a supermodel, now is it?" Harry snickered at the term of endearment and shifted Vixen to her boyfriend's supporting

arms before walking right up to the bound shape shifter. "Interesting friend you lot have here," he offered finally.

"Lord Osiris?" the shadow queried in a deferential tone. "However did you escape the Underworld and regain human form?"

Harry rolled his eyes. "I snuck out the back door when nobody was looking, but don't tell anyone," he replied sarcastically before silently querying his ring for advice.

'This entity is an artificial and malevolent construct,' Hal replied. 'I recommend obliteration by a sharp implement.'

'Fair enough,' Harry replied and summoned his new axe from his gauntlet. "Now, Chuck tells me that this weapon can cut through any substance or force, even intangible ones," he mused aloud. "Let's find out, shall we?" Gripping the haft by the far end, he swung the weapon overhead, neatly bisecting the Shadow Thief in two. As the halves separated, both pieces quickly dissolved into nothing.

Harry quirked an eyebrow. "Yep, definitely a keeper," he noted to himself. Stowing the weapon away, Harry turned his attention to the four people staring at him with emotions ranging from amusement to disbelief.

"So, is everyone alright?" he prompted. "No ill affects from that gadget?"

"Just some weird memories," Shayera answered. "That database really did a number on my skull."

Harry nodded in reluctant agreement. "Tell me about it. I've found that trudging through the past is always awkward."

His comment earned three pairs of bulging eyes. "You mean that wasn't a hallucination?" John Stewart demanded. "That thing really shows... the past?"

"I'm afraid so," the wizard confirmed. "It briefly accessed one of my hazy memories, from a lifetime ago." Harry shook his head. "Ah, well. What's done is done, and there's nothing to do for it now but to learn from our mistakes and move on with our lives."

The magician smiled ironically as he recalled another of Dumbledore's fortune cookie sayings. "After all, the old man always said that it doesn't do to dwell on dreams and forget to live. Don't you agree?"

"I think you have something there," Carter Hall announced. "If I might ask, what became of the database after you freed us?"

Harry patted his coat pocket. "I'm going to put it where it won't be such a nuisance," he informed the group.

'Besides,' he added privately, 'I've been looking for a pensieve of my own, and this one is much more appealing than Dumbledore's old stone basin—or, it will be once Henchgirl fixes it, at least.'

Sketching a short bow, he concluded by saying, "Now, since you all appear to have escaped without harm, I believe that we are done here." Turning to the curator, Harry continued, "Do you mind if I look around, Carter? Archaeology's something of a hobby of mine."

"Be my guest," the man replied distractedly.

Harry nodded again and announced, "Thanks. Well, goodbye."

"Wait!" Vixen called. "No pearls of wisdom for me?"

Harry shrugged. "Watch out for falling dinosaurs?" he offered tentatively.

The woman rolled her eyes. "Thanks a lot," she muttered.

A barely audible electronic alarm sounded, drawing Harry's attention. The noise was accompanied by a familiar scent. "Is that coffee?" he demanded of the winged curator.

"Probably," Carter answered, "I have a pot brewing. Would you like—" a sudden gust of wind signaled the wizard's super fast departure "—some?" he finished questioningly. Looking to the others, the man asked, "Who is he?"

The three more experienced League members looked at one another before silently electing John their spokesperson. "Trust me," the Green Lantern advised, "you wouldn't believe us even if we told

you. We just call him Mr. Black. It doesn't cause as many headaches that way."

Harry's Zippo started buzzing while he was taking pictures of the ancient Greece exhibit. Amongst the scattered artifacts, the wizard had found a series of statues of the Greek pantheon of gods. Strangely enough, a few of them vaguely resembled Thena, Artie, and a younger version of Nem. Making a mental note to show the women a photograph of the display some day, he flipped open the floo connection.

"Black here," he stated.

"Umm... it's Tim," a seemingly emotionless male voice answered. "My house just caught on fire without warning; my dad... Bill Hunter was burned pretty badly. The fire disappeared a few moments ago, but he's still badly hurt and unconscious."

"I'll be right there!" Harry said decisively. "Are you alright?"

"Yeah, I'm fine," the youth replied. "I could barely even feel the heat, much less get burned. I don't think the fire was natural, though; it disappeared too quickly."

Hearing that, Harry Apparated outside to retrieve his motorbike before instantly transporting himself outside of Ravenknoll Estates. He quickly strode over to Tim's side and gave the boy an once-over before turning his attention to the apparently intact dwelling.

"Yes, I can see definite traces of dark magic," he confirmed. "Where's Mr. Hunter?"

"The ambulance just picked him up," Tim replied. "He's really messed up. Is there anything you can do?"

The arrival of a white-haired man with a ponytail and expensive suit interrupted the two. "Oh, Tim, I'm so sorry! Constantine trusted me to protect you and your father... but I arrived here too late."

"John sent you?" the boy asked, even as Harry frowned at the man. "To take care of Dad and me?"

Feeling a little suspicious by both the man's appearance and behavior, Harry inspected the newcomer thoroughly. A brief glimpse with Mage Sight, however, had the immortal-wizard-turned-Death hoisting the other man aloft in a chokehold. Smiling grimly as Hal silently relayed some pertinent information, the dimension-traveling magician shook his head negatively. "No, Tim. I sincerely doubt that even John and his friends would be foolish enough to send a wizard this dark to look over you," he informed the young man, "especially one with a taste for arson."

Timothy's eyes bulged. "You mean...?"

Harry nodded as the non-human smiled coldly. "And what brings the likes of you to this forsaken land, Death Bringer?" the other man demanded.

"I have taken Tim into my house," Harry acknowledged as he stepped between the two. "He is to me as my own son, and I will allow no harm to befall him—especially from such wretched filth as you."

"You did this?" Tim suddenly roared. "I'm going to kill you!" The shorter figure ducked around Harry and leaped at the suited man – but was seized by Harry's superior reflexes and pulled just out of the way of a thrown fireball.

The wizard raised a shield as a wall of flame rushed towards them. "He's out of your League, Tim!" Harry said through gritted teeth. "I'll deal with him. Mortis, get Tim out of here!" he ordered. The pooka appeared before his owner and, once Harry placed his son on the horse's back, took off skyward—well out of range of the mystical pyromaniac.

Hoping that a combination of his coat's protective spells, Etrigan's flamboyant gift, and whatever Death abilities he could access would counter the unfamiliar fire-based shield, Harry dashed through the fiery barrier. His gambit worked, as he was completely unharmed by the mystical flame. Scanning the surrounding area, the wizard just caught sight of his target fleeing inside one of the apartments. He chased the dark magician through the residence and, upon trapping his prey in his own warded room, proceeded to dispatch the evil man in a rather painful manner.

Noticing the Dark Arts material present, Harry performed a quick packing spell on the paraphernalia and sending it to his trunk. Once his clean up was complete, the new Death went back outside to check on Tim. He found the youth standing in the front yard as Mortis looked on, talking to both a blonde and a brunette girl. "Mortis," Harry chastised, "when I said to get him to safety, I meant further away than the edge of the property!"

"It's not his fault, Joe," Tim confessed. "I saw Molly and Leah coming by, and flew down to warn them."

Harry just sighed, before wondering absently if Dumbledore ever felt this way regarding his own exploits.

Sensing no impending rebuke, Tim intently asked, "So, is Professor Shades going to be joining us?"

"I wouldn't think so," Harry replied. "He's a bit... strewn about at the moment. I didn't even catch his name," he mused. "I think I'll call him 'Chuck'. So, who are your friends?" he asked, giving the two girls a cautious look.

"I'm Molly," the black-haired girl answered. "Who're you?"

"Joe Black," he supplied, offering his hand to the young woman. "I'm Tim's... guardian."

"You're Mr. Black?" the blonde girl queried. "The one who Master and his Flame Cult friends were hiding from?"

Harry nodded. "The same." Noticing that the girl was giving out similar sensations as Veela women—though there were distinct variations, not to mention the 'Master' reference—he studied the youth more closely. Hal identified the girl's heritage just as he came to the same conclusion himself.

"You know what I am, don't you?" she asked, head tilted downward dejectedly.

He nodded again in confirmation. "I can only guess why Chuck came after Tim here with a succubus. So, now that you're free, what are you going to do?"

"Wait for my next master to come along, I guess," Leah admitted resignedly. "I'm not out to hurt anyone, if that's what you're asking."

The younger wizard looked confused. "Why do you even need a master?" he asked. "Do you like being a slave or something?"

The deceptively young-looking girl explained to Tim exactly what she was, as well as what her heritage entailed.

"Isn't there something you can do?" the boy asked his magical guardian.

Harry thought it over for a moment, before an idea began to form. Smiling, he asked, "Tim, you ever hear the story of Aladdin?"

The wizard-in-training blinked. "Will that actually work?"

"Will you two stop being so cryptic!" Molly demanded. "Will what work?"

"Taking possession of Leah, then ordering her to be free," Tim explained.

The brunette's eyes widened. "Oh! Well, that makes sense!"

Leah seemed to agree and, for reasons Harry preferred not to contemplate, chose Tim to be her temporary master. The plan went off without a hitch, and the succubus was shortly free to do as she pleased. After they completed the transaction, however, she pointed out a valid concern.

"But what if someone finds my box and knows my name?" the blonde girl asked. "Then they can just order me back into servitude."

Harry thought the matter over for a few moments. "Not a problem," he finally replied. "Tim, give me the box for a second." The boy did as instructed, and his guardian conjured a simple golden locket. After placing a subdimension pocket charm inside the ornament, Harry proceeded to stuff the box inside its new home. To finish off the deception, he cast the Fidelius charm on the locket, before ensuring that only the person who put the locket on could remove it.

"Alrighty, then. Leah, if you'll come here for a second...?" He slipped the pendant over the girl's head. "There. That should take care of your problem nicely."

"What problem is that?" she asked confusedly.

Harry scribbled the secret onto a conjured scrap of parchment. Once the girl had read the paper, he Vanished it.

"What did you do?" Leah asked as she stared at the golden trinket.

He smiled. "Hid the secret. Now, only the two of us know it, and I'm the only one who can ever remove the locket. You're free now – for keeps. Go do what you want for a change. Have some fun, do some shopping... whatever it is that girls do for kicks these days."

She smiled widely. "Thank you! Thank you both!" the fair-haired succubus exclaimed, hugging each wizard in turn. "I think I'll head back to California, maybe take up modeling. It's a lot warmer over there!"

Harry quirked a smile at her enthusiasm. "Sounds like a plan," he admitted. "If you want, I can give you a lift to California after we visit Mr. Hunter. I own a nightclub in San Francisco so, if you need a job to get on your feet, I can help. I'm also friends with a professional model—Mari McCabe? She might be able to help you out as well."

"Are you serious?" she asked disbelievingly.

The wizard shrugged in turn. "Why not? I'd imagine you'd get on well with Harley—she's another recent hire at the club. Nice girl, but she's going through a rough patch at the moment. Now that I think about it, you two actually have a lot in common." Shaking his head to dismiss the thought, Harry continued, "Anyway, if modeling's really your thing, Mari knows her stuff. If you'd like, we can work out the details after we finish up here. Deal?"

"Deal!" she accepted cheerfully.

"Excellent!" Harry concluded. "So, Molly, you coming along, too?"

"Well, somebody has to make sure that Tim's okay!" the bushy-haired girl exclaimed in a tone strangely reminiscent of a certain

book-loving Gryffindor of his acquaintance. "Umm... I don't suppose that we could get some ice cream on the trip, could we?"

"I don't see why not," the elder mage agreed with a laugh. "Say, are either of you two girls afraid of heights by any chance?"

At seeing their uneasy expressions, Harry sighed. Since he had no idea where the hospital was located, Apparation, Portkeys, and Black Holes were all out of the question. He began racking his brain for an alternate means of traveling to the infirmary, before his gaze fell upon the late Martyn's stylish red convertible.

Smiling widely, the immortal mage continued, "Never mind. It's not an issue."

Tim, who had spent enough time with the magician to hear tales of his occasional bouts of larceny, said, "You're not thinking what I think you're thinking, are you?"

Harry, however, had already vaulted the car's door and was in the process of searching for the ignition key on the ring he had... borrowed from the fallen dark wizard—along with the man's wallet and Dark Arts equipment.

'Waste not, want not' and all that.

Pulling out his Zippo, he called the Doctor and explained the crisis with Bill Hunter. After extracting a promise for a speedy delivery on burn healing potions, Harry motioned the three into the car. "All right, everyone, let's get this show on the road. Tim, do you know where your dad was taken?"

"St. Bartholomew's," he answered as he hopped into the front passenger seat, "but I don't know where it is."

Harry looked over at the boy. "Are you a wizard or aren't you? Remember the 'point me' spell?"

Tim smacked himself. "Oh, right! Point Me St. Bartholomew's Hospital." His wand spun around on his palm before pointing in an eastern direction.

"There we go!" Harry said happily. "All aboard?" Once the two girls were situated, he started the car and floored the accelerator pedal. With a piercing squeal of laid rubber, the group was on their way to the hospital—a fact that the three passengers privately considered extremely convenient, considering the quality of their current chauffeur's driving ability.

A/N: Thus concludes Chapter Twelve of Terminal Justice, weighing in at a decent 12,000 words. I drew several ideas straight from Rorschachblot's Belief omake, but the remaining verbose blather is all mine.

Many thanks to James for proofreading this chapter, and to Chris for his background information on the various DCverse fixtures. Additional, credit goes to Moshehim for pointing out an oversight when I defined a Death's role in the Universe. That error has been corrected.

One concern I wish to address is whether Harry's actually becoming a Death negates the concept of an ordinary—though terribly (un)lucky—guy being constantly mistaken for legendary figures, seeing as how he is a Death.

I was of two minds regarding this issue—in fact, I discussed the possibility with RB months ago, before polling my betas and the group, and finally deciding to go ahead with it. Ultimately, I decided that a) Harry really isn't all that ordinary anymore and, b) being a Death wouldn't really change his modus operandi. Essentially, the only real difference is that he's picked up a few new tricks to use on the bad guys.

As far as the pool for mistaken identity candidates is concerned, Harry is just a Death, not an actual, easily recognized personage. In fact, he is now even more likely to be mistaken for culturally significant death gods such as Osiris, Anubis, Thanatos, etc. I've also got a few vague ideas for other non-Death IDs, including Thor, Pecos Bill, and Zorro. Whether any of the above will make it into a chapter is still undecided, but there you have it.

Rest assured that, despite the recent revelation, Harry will still get misunderstood on a regular basis.

Now, another concern that has been raised is that Harry has become too super. As I've previously stated, Terminal Justice is a continuation of Make a Wish and Hunt for Harry Potter, not an attempt to recreate the original works. In the original MaW story, the concept of Mr. Black was introduced. The RB-written sequel proceeded to focus on Harry's attempts to salvage his personal 'Harry Potter' life. My intentions for this project, on the other hand, is to explore and develop the Mr. Black persona via exposure to the Justice League and its environs.

During his journey in the JLU universe, Harry will learn additional applications of his "superpowers" while continuing to develop as a frequently misunderstood person. As a result, the 'Mr. Black' persona may grow and change from its initial conception in Make a Wish. Rest assured that any serious alterations will have first been approved by Rorschach's Blot, and will not require an extreme suspension of belief.

Thank you for your interest, and please remember to review.

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Chapter 13: Safari, So Good—or—The Beat Goes On by Overkill

Next Chapter

Disclaimer: This is a cross between JLA (Season 5) and Rorschach's Blot's Make A Wish Story. Harry Potter is owned by JK Rowling and various publishers. Henchgirl, The Professor, and other such objects are Rorschach's creation. DC Comics own the Justice League and associated characters/plot devices. The lack of plot, however, can be attributed to me.

A/N: Due to some valid concerns raised in a review, I have revised the ending of the previous chapter. Nothing major has changed, but you might wish to review museum sequence before reading this chapter. Thank you.

Safari, So Good—or—The Beat Goes On

Harry closed his latest book with a disgusted sigh before tossing the article out of sight. After yet another restless night, the wizard decided that something had to change. Every time he managed to drift off to sleep, the wizard was plagued with involuntary dreams courtesy of his new...office. Eventually succumbing to the inevitable, Harry gave up any pretense of resting and decided to catch up on his reading.

This strategy was not without its consequences, however. For example, Harry's most recent foray into his library had netted a book detailing the notable achievements of Ignatius the Ignorant. He shuddered to imagine how—or more importantly, why—a wizard would do those sorts of things with a flobberworm and document it, but Harry found it deeply disconcerting.

'Ah,' Harry exulted as his questing hand found another volume, 'The Illegal Book of Illegal Things. I forgot I had this...' He flipped through a few pages. 'Now, that looks like fun! And that. Huh, I wonder if I could get away with that...'

His brief respite was not to last, however, as a persistent—sensation—suddenly thrust its way to the forefront of his thoughts. Curiously enough, the scene consisted of a dark-skinned man dressed in esoteric, shamanistic clothing. The tall figure stood in

what appeared to be a deserted bazaar and was holding a golden ankh—not unlike the one that Teleute had presented him only a few hours ago. Sighing again at the irritating method of gaining his attention, Harry Apparated to the African man's location.

His fervent wish that the magical adept was not in league with the shopkeeper syndicate was promptly dashed as soon as the now-identified merchant opened his mouth.

"Hello, Mr. Black. Thank you for coming," the tall man wearing a funny hat said.

Between his choice of dress and accent, Harry determined the man to be an African native. "Shopkeeper," he nodded dully in reply. "I trust that you have a good reason for calling my attention in this manner?"

"Most assuredly, Sir," the other man agreed quickly, "there is—"

"That doesn't involve quests," Harry interrupted firmly.

The shopkeeper continued, undaunted. "No quests, Mr. Black, just some information for you. What you choose to do with it is up to you."

"Right," the wizard answered skeptically. "Where are we, anyway?"

"Mombasa, the second largest city in Kenya."

"That's good to know. So, what's this pressing information?"

"My tribe has been guarding a certain secret location for many, many generations," the merchant admitted. "Now, however, the heavens have revealed that the secret is no longer undisclosed, and the treasures within are in danger of being stolen."

Harry's eyes narrowed. "You don't say," he drawled dryly. "And what nature might these 'treasures' be? Gold? Jewels? Dangerous magical artifacts, perhaps?"

The other man blinked. "Why, yes. How did you know?"

Harry silently groaned. "Lucky guess," he verbalized sarcastically. "So, you want me to go to this 'secret location' and grab an artifact or two before someone else does?"

"Amazing," the merchant exclaimed. "Do you also possess the Sight?"

The dimensional traveler sighed again. "No," he replied mournfully, "just rotten luck. If I'm not mistaken, this is the part where you try to sell me a bunch of stuff for this not-a-quest."

"Absolutely incredible!" the shopkeeper breathed in reply as he began placing items on the counter, specifically an ancient-looking scroll and an old bolt-action rifle. Shaking off his apparent awe, the man explained, "This scroll is a map to the fabled mines of King Solomon, located within the Three Witches Mountain. Hidden within lies the wealth of nations. Aside from this, there is an item of tremendous power—one of the fabled Crystal Skulls."

Upon seeing Harry's blank look, he expounded upon his previous statement. "Legends say that there are a total of thirteen Crystal Skulls scattered across all of creation, fashioned out of clear quartz crystal and resembling a human skull in general appearance. Their origins are a mystery, but many believe them to be a product of Atlantean sorcery eons ago. While it is rumored that the Skulls appear identical, each possesses its own unique mystical powers—some good and some ill—"

"You know," Harry interrupted, "this is sounding suspiciously like a quest."

The other man assumed an innocent look that a five-year-old child could dissemble. "I assure you, Most Honored Guardian, that I merely wish to inform you of the Skulls' potential powers."

The wizard gave him a resigned look. "Fine," Harry conceded, "proceed."

"Thank you, Mr. Black. Some of the Skulls are a center of radiant psychic energy and have the power to increase happiness and improve people's lives just by being held. Others can be used like crystal balls to aid divination. Another allegedly grants its owner the power to see through objects. Certain pieces contain supernatural

restorative powers, healing nearly any illness. One is even rumored to grant its bearer some form of transportation powers."

Harry nodded his understanding. "Well, those all certainly sound beneficial to mankind, so—what's the catch?"

"You understand the need for balance," the shopkeeper noted, "very good. Other Skulls are entirely destructive in nature. One particular Skull was lost during the Mayan Empire, when the High Priest used it in esoteric rites to bring death upon anyone he desired. Others can supposedly steal dreams, destroy locations or structures, served as prisons for souls, or even bring about the apocalypse."

His customer blinked. "Alright, that's—very bad."

"Yes," the other man agreed solemnly, "you can understand why it is paramount that the Skulls not fall into the wrong hands. As we speak, there are dark powers at work to combine the thirteen Skulls. They. Must. Not. Succeed."

"I should say not," Harry breathed. "What happens if the Skulls were combined?"

"I—do not know for certain," the shopkeeper admitted, "but some believe that it would yield a weapon of unparalleled power, capable of destroying whole galaxies or even magic itself. As the individual pieces are brought together, it is said that they develop new powers when used as one." He shrugged. "Of course, for all I know, it might just form a shiny pile of quartz, but do you really want to take that chance?"

Harry shook his head negatively. "It appears that I have a new quest," he finally announced. "I suppose that it would be too much to hope for that you have some way of locating the rest of the Skulls..." "Sorry, Mr. Black. I know of no such methods." Shrugging resignedly, Harry changed the topic. "So, what's the deal with the gun?"

"Oh, that's just an old Lee-Metford bolt-action rifle. Firearms like this one are still popular on safaris and hunting expeditions."

"And why should that affect me?"

"Well, what tourist can possibly visit Africa and take an overland journey without going on a big-game hunt? We have some of the most spectacular scenery anywhere in the world, and the wildlife is extremely exotic. Even if you don't hunt the beasts, you would draw attention to yourself if no member of your party was visibly armed."

"And it's just a regular gun? No strange and easily misinterpreted features that will only cause more headaches for me?" Harry prompted.

"None at all, Mr. Black. I assure you that this firearm is quite unremarkable, save its still serviceable condition."

"That sounds very good," Harry admitted as he considered the other man's proposal. Both Kara and Galatea had enjoyed their short journey to Avalon—and the kids would probably appreciate the overland journey as well. "Alright," he conceded, "I'll take the map and the rifle."

"Excellent. I've taken the liberty of marking a suggested safari path on the map, leading from the outskirts of the city to the mines."

Once their business was concluded, the merchant bid his customer good fortune and Harry Apparated back to the Watchtower to inform his girlfriend, her not-quite-identical twin sister, and his two children of the scenic possibility.

Glancing down at his watch and noticing the early hour, Harry revised his plan to waiting until after the Argosian females arose for the day before popping in on them. Looking around for something to pass the time, his attention landed upon the antique rifle in his hands as he recalled placing a Silencing Charm on his room weeks ago.

Harry smiled as he began Conjuring statue replicas of the vanquished Voldemort and his former Inner Circle.

"Go on a safari?" Kara exclaimed a few hours later. "Awesome! I'm in!"

"Me, too," her taller sister agreed. "When do we leave?"

"As soon as I see if Raven or Tim is interested in joining us," Harry answered.

The shorter blonde woman pondered the issue for a few moments before suggesting, "Perhaps we should invite Mari along as well. I think she's from Kenya originally—she would be a great guide. What do you think?"

Harry shrugged. "Sounds like a plan to me. Do you want to invite her, or should I?"

"I can do that," Kara promised. "By the way, are you doing anything tomorrow afternoon?"

"I don't think so," he replied. "Why?"

"Well..." she hesitated, "I was talking with a few of the girls from that convention a few weeks ago, and you happened to come up in the discussion. One thing led to another and..."

"And..." Harry pressed.

"They... wanttomeetyouinperson." she said quickly.

Once he deciphered the girl's jumbled words, Harry's reply was quick, resolute, and unyieldingly negative.

"But it's for a good cause," Kara pleaded.

"Absolutely not. I'm a behind-the-scenes sort of bloke, and a very poor choice for a role model. Get Flash to go, or your cousin. Heck, take Tea along. She'd probably get on well with them."

Before the blonde extraterrestrial could wrangle an agreement from him, Harry blurted that he would meet them at the teleporters and Apparated planet side to collect the youngest members of their group. Once he tracked down the pair—both of whom were found in Titans' Tower—Harry extended the invitation. Not only did the pair of teenagers agree to attend, his daughter's green friend begged and pleaded until he was allowed to accompany them as well. The quartet returned to the orbiting space station and met up with the rest of their party, which had grown to include not only Mari McCabe but also her 'boo' John Stewart.

"Only two this time, Kara?" Harry asked innocently. "You're slipping."

The blonde woman shrugged. "Well, I see that you found an extra passenger this trip."

Harry shrugged. "What can I say? He has a very good puppy face."

"I'll bet," she fired back good-naturedly, having already met the green shape shifter. "So—where are we headed?"

"The outskirts of Mombasa, in Kenya," Harry supplied.

John raised an eyebrow. "And what's so important in Mombasa?"

"Not in Mombasa," the wizard corrected. "Outside of it, in the Three Witches Mountain."

Mari's eyes widened. "You don't mean—?"

"Mean what?" the Green Lantern repeated his question.

Harry nodded. "Yep. I needed to stop by and pick up something."

"Stop by where?" Mari's boyfriend queried in a frustrated tone.

"Why, King Solomon's mines, of course," the magician replied easily.

"King Solom—you know where they are?" The intergalactic guardian paused for a moment and seemed to regain his self-control. "Of course you know where the mines are," John said, as much to himself as Harry. "Why wouldn't you know?"

The wizard opened his mouth to reply, but John just shook his head to negate the other man's efforts. Dropping the conversation, Harry asked, "So, is everyone ready?"

Once the group gave their affirmation, Harry transported the small party to the starting point of their journey on the Dark Continent.

"Cool!" Beast Boy exclaimed. "And you can just go wherever you want? Just 'poof!' and there you are?"

Harry smiled and nodded. "Pretty much anywhere, any time. Now," he continued, turning to Mari, "What mode of transportation would you recommend for a trip of this nature?"

The African native took a brief headcount and suggested procuring a couple of jeeps from an automotive rental agency she spotted in the distance. After doing so, Harry described the route that the bizarre bazaar owner had sketched—which met with Vixen's approval. In fact, the civilian-dressed supermodel even suggested a couple of additional deviations along the way.

The group spent the majority of the day traversing the wilds of Kenya, taking photographs of the wildlife and generally enjoying the time away from world saving. As the sun began to set, the group arrived at the Three Witches Mountain just as the shopkeeper promised. As the two off-road vehicles reached the cave entrance, Harry signaled for them to stop.

"Alright," he informed the others, "this is as far as the jeeps go. Hang tight, and I'll be back in a little while."

The others met his proposal with immediate and boisterous protest, and the wizard soon found himself followed through the carved passageways.

"Well, this is a very nice hole in the ground," Beast Boy complained as the group trod single file.

"Isn't it, though?" Harry replied from the front as he recalled the last few instructions from the map. "This way," he informed the others, before ducking into another passage. The group followed and soon found themselves standing in a roomy chamber.

"Whoa!" Kara exclaimed, mirroring the others' unspoken reactions to the gilded objects strewn around the space. The giant vault was positively filled with gold, be it coin or ornament. Scattered amongst the yellow metal was jewels of a variety of colors and sizes.

"I don't suppose we dropped in to get my allowance, did we?" Tim asked as he took in the hoard of wealth.

Harry chuckled. "Sorry, Mate, but no," the elder magician replied. Stepping carefully between the precarious piles of precious metals,

he approached a fluted, waist-height column at the center of the chamber. His ultimate objective rested upon the pillar, the crystal reflecting the light from the group's Lumos charms and power ring.

Squatting down to examine his objective's protections under Mage Sight, Harry added, "This is what I came to collect."

The mage's disinterest in the 'obviously' more valuable objects earned several questioning looks, verbalized by the green shape shifter. "Umm—why exactly do you want that, when all this cool stuff is just laying here? I mean, the whole crystal skull thing's a little creepy."

"I thought they were just a myth," Raven breathed before floating over to her father's side.

"Hello?" Gar called out impatiently. "Will someone please tell me what's going on?" he pleaded.

With a put-upon sigh, Raven recited the relevant background information on the artifacts.

"Okay, then," Kara deliberated as the group stared at the sparkling prize. "What does this Skull do?"

Harry shook his head. "I don't know," he finally admitted as he worked out the best way to defeat the protections placed around the artifact. "It's not like I ever used it before."

"Well, that should be easy enough to figure out," Tim announced as he reached to seize the device.

Harry shot out an arm and seized his son's appendage at the wrist before he could trip the wards protecting the Skull. "Don't," he instructed the youth firmly. Paraphrasing Arthur Weasley's advice from many years previous, he added, "Never trust anything if you can't see where it keeps its brain. You remember how to use Mage Sight, don't you?" The teenager nodded and Harry gestured for him to inspect the pillar under the magical vision.

Tim winced when he saw the various spells layered around the Skull. "Uhh—whoops?" he finally voiced sheepishly.

Harry just shook his head and wondered—not for the first time—if Dumbledore ever had days like this.

"So..." the wizard-in-training spoke again, "what are all of those?"

"Wards, hexes, curses—the usual," the elder wizard supplied. "Not quite up to par with some of the Egyptian warding schemes, but not bad." He started pointing out some of the different pieces of magic to the younger man. "This is the outer proximity ward—it sets off the primary defenses, like bone breaking hexes and organ rotting curses. The orange shield would generate an electric field fatal to humans. The gray one beneath that looks like one of the Egyptian salt acid wards. The greenish-purple bubble—"

"I get the general idea," Tim interrupted. "If it's that well protected, then it'll take forever to get through those defenses."

Harry smiled. "Not quite that long, I would think," he said smugly. "Whoever laid these protections made one error. Can you kids spot it?"

Raven and Tim both examined the well-protected column from every angle. After several minutes, Raven finally ceded defeat. "I cannot find a flaw, Father," she said. "It seems that if you interrupted the outer shell, the power would be diverted to the inner shields, making them even stronger. It looks impregnable." Her half-brother nodded in agreement.

The eldest magician's grin grew wider. "Look at the floor," he said simply.

The two teenagers did as he instructed, causing their eyes to bulge shortly afterward.

"They forgot to shield the floor?" Tim demanded incredulously. "How thick can you get?"

Harry shrugged carelessly before phasing down into the stone floor. He reappeared moments later, rising from the ground inside the protections. Rechecking to ensure that the skull bore no further traps, the wizard levitated the Crystal Skull into a conjured bag—which he promptly pocketed.

"Well, that's that," he announced once he rejoined the rest of the group. After he convinced the younger members of the party to leave the gold and jewels where they lay, Harry placed a Fidelius Charm over the caverns, and the assemblage made its way back to the surface. A surprise awaited them where they parked their jeeps, however, in the form of a half-dozen costumed tribesmen.

As John stepped forward to interrogate the other group, Harry felt a sudden sense of foreboding at their unexpected presence.

"Is there something we can help you with?" the resident Green Lantern asked firmly.

The apparent chief of the small band stepped forward. "I am Msamaki. We come seeking the assistance of Macumazahn," the man explained in heavily accented English. "Our village...wise woman says that we will find him here tonight."

The bald Leaguer frowned. "Macum—what?"

"Macumazahn," the native repeated, "he who watches in the night."

Harry's growing sense of unease spiked unexpectedly. Despite the feeling, he asked, "Why do you seek him?"

His comment redirected the new arrivals' attention unto himself—which would soon prove to be an unfortunate turn of events for a certain dimension-traveling mage. As one, the native group took in Harry's girlfriend-approved safari outfit consisting of a brown leather vest, matching denim pants, and a partially unbuttoned white shirt. His attire was further accessorized by his Army issue six-gun and recently acquired bolt-action elephant gun.

The group turned inward as the natives conversed rapidly between themselves. Their frequent and excited gestures in his direction somewhat failed to quiet his unease.

"Here we go again," the wizard grumbled.

"It is you!" the head African tribesman exclaimed. "He who watches in the night."

Harry sighed heavily, mourning the end of his trouble-free day, before replying, "'Mr. Black' will suffice. Now, what is this all about?"

Gathering a flurry of comments from the African citizens, Harry concluded that the group's small and isolated village was recently overrun by vampires. The natives had initially believed the strange disappearances to be the result of wild animal attacks but, as time went on, they discovered the supernatural nature of the reoccurring problem.

"Right then," Harry nodded decisively. "This shouldn't take too long. If you lot will kindly return the rigs to Mombasa, I'll deal with the vampires and meet up with you later."

"You didn't really think that would work, did you?" Kara asked dryly.

The accosted wizard shrugged. "I can always hope." Turning to the youngest members of their group, he asked, "You kids up for a practical exam in vamp dusting?"

While Raven seemed nonplussed at the notion, Tim appeared a little shaken. Neither of the two magically inclined teenagers' seemed panicked, however. As for the third adolescent present...

"Wait a minute!" Beast Boy called. "You mean vampires are real? Honest to goodness bloodsucking 'I hate garlic, sunlight, and running water' vampires?"

"The garlic thing's just a fairy tale," Harry corrected, "and most breeds don't really mind running water all that much. Nearly all vampires combust in sunlight, however, and there are very few things that aren't inconvenienced when you remove its head. In the case of demonic vampires—which seems to be what we're dealing with—the creatures have no souls and are susceptible to holy water and religious icons. Basically, the easiest ways to kill a vamp is to stake it, bake it, or decapitate it. Any questions?"

The green changeling shifted his feet nervously. "Umm—I'm not sure if I can do that," Gar admitted quietly. "I don't really have any anti-creepy crawly powers—I just turn into animals."

"Go with that, then," Harry advised. "Try for a predator with good attack skills and senses—like a wolf, or something."

"I can do that," the young Titan hesitantly admitted.

The wizard-turned-Death nodded at the younger man before turning his attention back to the current source of his frustration. After obtaining the village's name and recalling its coordinates from the map he purchased, the wizard tossed a Black Hole on the side of the hill. "Stay sharp, everyone," he bid before walking through the portal.

As the displaced group took in their new surroundings, Harry turned to the spokesperson for the villagers. "Is there a particular place where the vampires like to gather around here?"

The man looked around to get his bearings. "There's a tavern a few blocks from here," he supplied. "Some of our people donate blood to the creatures in exchange for protection for their families. The monsters visit nightly for their... tribute."

"Take us there," Harry ordered grimly. The man complied, leading the group to a inn-like structure. The wizard took in the rustic motif for a few moments before heading to the bar. "I've heard you have a leech infestation," he said bluntly, noticing the barkeeper's sudden nervous twitch. "Have they stopped by tonight yet?"

"N-no, Sir, not yet," the man replied uneasily.

"Good man," the wizard praised. "In that case, I believe that we'll have dinner. What would you recommend?"

"T-the steak tartare is very nice," the attendant informed, "especially when served with Berbere and Van Der Hum."

"That will be fine," Harry replied. "Put my friends on my bill." The wizard accepted a glass of the tangerine-based liquor and headed towards one of the larger tables.

"Msamaki," the barkeep whispered amazedly, "you actually found him? The legends of Macumazahn are true?"

"Why do you all keep calling him that?" Kara asked as she placed her order.

"Because, that is who he is," Msamaki insisted. "Macumazahn, he who watches in the night, the guardian of Africa."

"It's a local legend," Mari explained to the others. "The rest of the world knows him by the name Allan Quatermain."

"Not again!" John grumbled. "Besides, he normally picks a name that's somehow connected to 'Black'. The whole 'night watcher' thing fits, but 'Quatermain' is way off profile."

Galatea shrugged. "Maybe he ran out of pseudonyms."

Tim looked thoughtful. "You mean the big game hunter Quatermain in the late 1800s?" he asked the female metahuman. "The same Quatermain that twice helped the League of Extraordinary Gentlemen over a hundred years ago?"

Vixen nodded. "One and the same," she answered. "It was rumored that, as reward for his protection of the peoples against outside aggressors, Africa wouldn't allow Macum—Quatermain to die."

"But that's impossible!" the youthful mage protested. "Quatermain and the League's just a myth!"

Beast Boy stuck up his head. "Umm—excuse me, but what's the big deal? I mean, we all know that your dad's, like, ancient and all. And what's up with this league of special dudes, any way?"

"It's the 'League of Extraordinary Gentlemen'," the teenaged wizard corrected automatically. "They were the world's first superhero team, saved the planet from all sorts of stuff in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries—but it's all fiction! I mean, there was Miss Wilhelmina Murray from Dracula, Captain Nemo, Dr. Jekyll, The Invisible Man—"

Tim shook his head. "There's no way that all of that could have happened!" he asserted. "It's just plain impossible!"

Galatea suddenly smirked. "Oh, really?" she asked, and discretely gestured to a weathered painting hanging above the fireplace.

The youth's eyes widened as he compared the old portrait to his oblivious lounging stepfather. The image showed a man bearing

exceptional resemblance to the seated immortal, illustrating him in similar repose with an identical rifle painted in the background. The canvas's frame bore a simple inscription.

Allan Quatermain. 1887.

"It's all true," the dumbfounded teenager breathed. "King Solomon's mines, Fu Manchu's criminal empire, Professor Moriarty and the aerial war machines—everything."

"Whoa!" the green-skinned teenager announced dully.

The others gathered were in complete agreement.

Harry was about halfway finished with his tartare when the room suddenly fell silent. Looking up from his spicy beef entree, he saw over a dozen oddly dressed, pale figures lurking in the open door. "Looks like we have company," he said in a low tone.

As the new arrivals headed towards the now-shaking bartender, two wooden stakes floated out of Raven's cloak pocket. Without warning, the slivers of timber flew across the room, striking her targets and generating two clouds of dust.

"Excellently done, Raven, very nice reflexes," her father praised as he 'suntanned' two vampires and sent his Nordic axe flying to intercept a third's neck.

"They don't look so tough," Tim announced as he withdrew two stakes from his coat in wordless challenge.

"Oh, look, the snack thinks he's a vampire slayer," one of the undead creatures mocked as he stalked towards the Hunter scion. "What are you going to do now, infant?"

Tim's jaw clenched at the insult. "Well, for starters, I was thinking of doing... this!" Grabbing the monster's shirt in one fist, he threw the creature into one of his advancing colleagues. The third vampire rushed the young wizard, earning itself a stake through the heart. As the remaining ambulatory creatures righted themselves, Tim tossed his two stakes at the pair. One stake landed on its mark, leaving another pile of dust. As for the other...

"Bugger!" Tim cursed as the other stake missed his target, leaving him facing off against one very upset vampire without an obvious weapon. The youth raised his arms to defend himself—only to lower them again as the charging creature suddenly lit up like a signal flare.

"Watch yourself, Tim," Harry cautioned as he lowered his hand, having sent his son a little magical backup. "There's no need to show off."

While Harry was keeping an eye on the three less experienced teenagers, Kara and Galatea put his training on dark creatures to good use. Foregoing the stake-throwing route, the two Argosian women fell upon the remaining creatures with fervor strangely reminiscent of his brother on a hunt. While Kara seemed content to target undead hearts with her Heat vision, her sister took almost perverse delight in decapitating her opponents—typically with her bare hands.

It was almost enough to bring a tear to his eye, Harry later reflected—had the group not currently been engaged in a fight against a large quantity of animated, demon-infested corpses, that is.

The other two Leaguers soon got into the spirit of things, with Vixen using superhuman speed to attack the vampires head-on while the resident Green Lantern used a scythe construct to dispatch their foes from a distance.

Even Beast Boy ultimately shook off his hesitation, as Harry caught sight of a small green dinosaur tackle two vampires at once and dispose of them in a rather bestial manner.

Though Harry was chiefly occupied with sending balls of flame after the remaining threats, the exchange did not escape his notice. Specifically, he made a mental note that the emerald shape shifter's sudden burst of courage occurred immediately after the two creatures in question attempted to broadside his daughter.

Putting on a burst of speed, Harry chased down the last vampire standing as it attempted to flee the tavern. Keeping a vice-like grip around its neck, the wizard was preparing to end the creature's unnatural existence when one of the bar's patrons urged him to stop.

"What is it?" Harry asked the man intently, all the while maintaining his chokehold on the parasite in question.

"It's my daughter," the villager worriedly announced as a small boy hid behind him. "She and my son were caught outside at sunset. My son here managed to hide, but they took my little girl."

Harry turned suddenly blazing eyes on the undead in his grasp. "I'm only going to ask once," he said emotionlessly. "Where is your nest?"

"I'm not telling you anything!" the yellow-eyed beast swore between curses.

Nodding to himself, the wizard looked at the bartender. "You have a back room I can borrow, Mate? It won't take but a minute."

Wordlessly, the tavern's operator pointed at a wooden door in the corner behind the bar.

"Thank you," Harry answered politely. "The rest of you, kindly wait here. I shan't be long." Before anyone could intervene, Harry entered the small room and locked the door. A moment later, he silenced the storage area for good measure.

A few minutes later, the wizard exited the room—alone.

"Our friend reconsidered his position and told me where the girl was most likely taken," Harry announced to the waiting group. Swallowing the rest of his tangerine-based drink, he slung his rifle over his head. "Now, if you'll excuse me, the hunt is on. If you're coming along, don't forget the stakes. You might just need them."

With that said, he quickly strode from the vampire-free establishment, leaving behind several awed villagers and seven hastily departing superheroes.

After the Leaguers eliminated the remaining vampire infestation—and, fortunately, safely returned one young kidnap victim—they bid the Dark Continent adieu and went their separate ways. Fulfilling an earlier obligation, Harry stopped by the Leaky Cauldron to check in with Pamela and Harley. The two femme fatales had done an

admirable job of reviewing the current employees, as well as evaluating where changes needed to be made.

In fact, after he had made a few initial suggestions, Pamela took the proverbial ball and ran with it. The redheaded plant elemental had even found Harley a perfect job—a combination of security guard and barkeep.

Though Harry was still unable to understand the former Joker assistant's repeated references to ugly coyotes, he had to admit the blonde was a very competent employee. Once she learned that his preferred means of correction did not involve physical violence, the fun-loving female had begun to warm up to her new role in life—with copious assistance from Pamela that is.

Making his way through the crowd, Harry slipped behind the counter. "Hello, Harley," he greeted. "How are things going?"

"Oke dokee, Mistah B!" the former clown princess exclaimed loudly as she performed some odd dance while twirled bottles of drinks in her hands. "Red's in the office going over paperwork. Hey, I made a new drink. I call it 'Harley's Honey Delight', and it's got a real kick! Wanna try it?"

Harry nodded. "Sure," he answered, accepting one of the bottles. "Thanks, Harley. Keep up the good work." A simple Apparation got him to the workplace in question. "Good evening, Pam. Is everything alright?"

"Just fine, Mr. Black," Pamela Isley replied. "I'm just looking through the lineups for next week's entertainment. Here's the reports that need your approval."

"Thanks. I'll look over them right now. Is there anything else I can do for you?"

The green-skinned woman shook her head. "Nope, that's it. Thanks again—for everything."

Harry smiled. "You are most welcome. By the way, how's Leah settling in?"

"Pretty well, actually," the Queen of Green answered. "Perhaps even too well. She shares Harley's... unique sense of humor, and that's never a good thing."

Harry smiled slightly. "So, what's the new recruit up to?"

"She's at an audition across town right now, but she'll be back later tonight."

"Sounds good, Pam. Thanks for looking out for her. Good night."

"Night, Mr. Black," she answered before he Apparated to his room aboard the Watchtower.

Sitting the paperwork down at his desk, Harry opened the bottle of Harley's brew. Before he could sample the beverage, however, his Zippo alerted him to an incoming call.

"Black here," he answered.

"Hi, Mr. Black!" Henchgirl greeted. "How is everything?"

"Pretty well, all things considered," Harry responded. "I did learn something interesting yesterday," he admitted, before describing the events in the Midway City museum—chiefly, his run-in with Teleute and his new... job.

Once he completed his tale, his friend remained quiet for a few moments. "I'm sorry, Harry," she finally replied. "I know that you just wanted a normal life. Look on the bright side; you can see your folks now...err...eventually, anyway."

The wizard smiled slightly at his all-but-sister's attempt to console him. "I suppose you're right, Henchgirl," he acknowledged. "How are things on the Island?"

"That's why I'm calling. I wanted to let you know that the twins are assisting the Professor and me on a new project. We're having some trouble with the inter-dimensional Port-Trans targeting system. The latest machine would be able to send other people to you, but we couldn't think of a way to extract you all back home."

"I can see where that would be inconvenient," Harry noted.

"Tell me about it," she muttered. "Anyway, the four of us are working on a new idea to resolve the targeting issue. Basically, anyone leaving our dimension for a new destination will take along a specially made device—like the goblin tunnel spells. Once they reach their target dimension, they set up this portal, or door, or gate, and it can create a wormhole to another of the devices—no matter where it is."

Harry blinked disbelievingly at the rational and focused plan that his friends had developed. It sounded very reasonable on the surface, and the witch made it appear as if the task was ridiculously simple to perform.

That little tidbit alone was enough to set off warning bells in his mind. His long and, at times, excruciatingly painful association with the magic-wielding quartet led him to immediately begin preparing for the worst. "And have you encountered any problems so far?" he tentatively asked.

"Well, there're a couple major problems with the design. For example, the annoying little troll wants to make the gate out of a red hula-hoop. The twins, on the other hand, stol—borrowed a police call box and want to use that instead." The witch gave out a put-upon sigh. "They're all idiots, of course. Everyone knows that all the good dimensional transports are stone post-and-lintel constructs configured in concentric arrays. Much more durable than plastic or glass and...more plastic. We could have a pair of gates made in no time if we could get past this sticking point."

Harry manfully resisted the urge to forcibly brain himself with his own desk. "Alright, here's what you can do," he decided. "Tell the Professor that you'll use the ring idea, but I said to use stone for durability. Then you both tell the twins to put the call box back where they found it. I have enough problems without the Muggle telecommunications companies and law enforcement agencies adding to the list. Tell them you'll use the glass idea, but no more call boxes."

You got it, Boss man," the witch answered in a vindicated tone, "but what circular object can we make with stone and glass?"

He thought for a few moments before a memory from his first year at Hogwarts surfaced. "Well, since you're trying to see different dimensional possibilities...what about a mirror?"

The connection was silent for a few moments before Henghgirl sudden cried, ":That's brilliant! Then we could position the runes around the stone ring and use the glass as our conductor! Thanks, Mr. Black!"

"You're welcome, Henghgirl. If that's everything, then I'll wish you a good night."

"Hey, wait!" she called. "The Professor gave me the manual for your Universal Remote. He said that it should help with your product evaluation. Here it comes."

"Looks promising," Harry stated after catching the handwritten book. "I'll look into it. Thanks, Henghgirl."

"You're welcome, Mr. Black-Death. Buh bye!" She broke the connection before Harry could admonish her for the parting comment.

"I'll remember that," he told his Zippo before taking a swig from Harley's bottle and leaning back in his chair.

Hours later found Harry still studying the manuscript, albeit significantly less clear-headed and with a large volume of Harley's strangely appealing concoction missing.

"Huh," the wizard murmured as he attempted to read the manual, "a programmable timer. That's wicked." He squinted to read the messy handwriting. "Let's see... set the coordinates... input a place and time... enter how long the trip should last, and you're done! Instant roundtrip ticket to anywhere."

He removed the remote from his coat pocket and attempted to duplicate the instructions on the device without releasing the beverage. After several attempts and much fumbling through the available options, he finally managed to find the timer option. Laughing to himself, he pointed sharply at the Remote with his bottle-wielding hand.

"Now that's a good ide—" The sudden motion caused a fair amount of liquid to rush out of its container and cover the Remote, which then began to glow blue and spark.

"Well, that's not good," the wizard eloquently noted, just before the clearly malfunctioning device whisked him out of his comfortable chair and deposited him on the ground.

The ground that irrationally consisted entirely of grass and dirt, and was completely surrounded by dense foliage.

Blinking owlishly at his surroundings from his undignified seat, Harry finally mumbled, "Nope. Not good at all." Glaring at the still-sizzling Remote in his hand, he accused, "This is all your fault!" He tossed the troublesome gadget over his shoulder and climbed uneasily to his feet. Harry managed to stagger three steps before receiving an impact against his head.

The Universal Remote lay on the ground at his feet.

"Oh, no, you don't!" he exclaimed, before stomping the device into pieces. "We've reached the parting of the ways." He attempted again to leave the area—only to be accosted once more by a completely repaired Remote floating in front of his face.

"Argh!" the wizard screamed before snapping the device in half, throwing one piece heavenward and burying the other half in a hastily Reducto-ed hole in the ground.

"Whew!" Harry breathed out a relieved sigh as he went to wipe his forehead—and consequently poked himself in the eye with the regenerated Remote in his hand.

Staring blankly at the mischievous device, he muttered. "Either I'm beyond pissed, or I haven't had enough," he informed no one in particular. "Fine," he told his electronic companion in a put-upon tone, "you can stay with me."

It was then that he noticed that the 'program' button was flashing and the metaphorical penny finally fell. "Oh, I get it. The programmable timer feature works. Well, time to go home." He pressed the 'back' button and waited.

And waited.

And waited some more.

"I said 'time to go home'!" Harry snapped when it became obvious that his brilliant waiting strategy was not working. He pressed the 'stop' button, but discovered that it was also rendered inactive. So, too, were 'exit', 'cancel', and 'power'.

"Alright, then. Death space-time powers, do your thing." The next several experiments to will himself back to his proper time and location failed—he later determined—due to the conflicting temporal anomaly that the Remote was generating.

Unwilling to leave the device behind and risk it falling into the wrong hands, Harry resigned himself to waiting for the Remote's program to run its course—however long that would take.

Curious as to where—and when—the gadget had stranded him, Harry looked at his watch. His eyes widened comically when he saw the read-out bore both a scientific notation and a 'BC' suffix. Shoving his hands in his pockets, Harry began stomping off in a random direction in hopes of finding some sort of settlement. Though it did not brighten his spirits, Harry did manage to answer one of his questions.

He most definitely had not consumed enough alcohol.

That was the highlight of his discoveries, however. For starters, his wanderings carried him into even more impenetrable plantlife, rather than the hoped-upon village. Secondly, as Harry jumped unsteadily over a fallen tree while calling a certain short and eccentric inventor thirty seven kinds of fool, he came face-to-face with a strange reptilian creature. It stood just over six feet tall and greatly resembled an ugly scale-covered turkey. Had Harry been paying closer attention, he would have noticed that its total length exceeded twenty feet.

Harry did not notice this particular detail, however, though his intoxicated state was not to blame. No, his complete—and suddenly sober—concentration was riveted on the crouching form's exposed nine inch claws and bared teeth. Before he could study the situation

further, the apparent dinosaur charged his position and he instinctively reacted.

Wiping the finely minced innards of the Reducto-ed predator off his face, Harry barely had time to take stock of the situation before a faint whisper of sound alerted him to the presence of more danger. In an instant, three more of the creatures burst out of the undergrowth, flanking him on both sides and the rear.

As one, the pack charged, allowing Harry just enough opportunity to hex a second creature before he was forced to fend the animals off with his melee weapons. After warding off several coordinated slashing attacks, the wizard finally managed to kill the pair of beasts.

"Well," Harry noted aloud as he looked at the hundreds of pounds of prehistoric meat, "that's got the immediate food issue addressed."

Before he could move to dispose of the remains, however, Harry heard—and felt—the approach of several other creatures. Within moments, he was once more surrounded, this time by what he could only describe as a hunting band of prehistoric demons.

'Apparently,' Harry decided, 'it's going to be one of those days.'

Harry raised his two blades to ready positions, and the band of demons charged.

Despite the inhospitable surroundings and general lack of anything resembling civilization, Harry was never distracted from solving the Universal Remote conundrum. While the absence of the Remote's manual retarded the process, Harry eventually manipulated the device to display the particulars of the activated program—chiefly, how much time remained in the current jump. Unfortunately, there appeared to be no method of predicting future jumps, or of canceling the pending operations.

Harry had several rather blunt recommendations to the Professor regarding that particular issue. Some of which, he doubted, could be performed by a vertebrate.

Without an obvious power source, his initial thoughts of removing the battery was rendered immediately inoperable. Likewise, his frantic actions upon arrival spoke ill of the 'Remote obliteration' plan.

Ultimately, Harry decided that his current course of action was the wisest and resigned himself to continue the automated adventure until it finally led him back to his room in the Watchtower.

After a long and eye-opening stay on prehistoric Earth, the Remote finally reached the end of its current program and Harry prepared for the next phase of his journey—which hopefully led directly to his orbiting apartment aboard the Justice League Watchtower. However, his luck remained true to form and, instead of fabricated living quarters, he found himself standing in yet another unfamiliar landscape.

This realization earned an entirely new volley of curses aimed at the Professor's well being.

The rest of Harry's 'vacation from his vacation' continued in a similar vein. On the bright side, he met new and interesting people while traveling to exotic locations. On the other hand, the 'most interesting' features of his new friends seemed to unfailingly complicate—if not out-and-out threaten—his livelihood.

As near as he could tell, there was no set pattern to the Remote's madness. The malfunctioning device dragged him forwards and backwards through both time and the occasional dimensional boundary, all in order to complete its task.

On one such trip, Harry was transported to the medieval times of King Arthur. Carefully avoiding the key players whom had interacted with him in the future, Harry donned a simple suit of unmarked black armor and aided the young king on a few of his campaigns to unify ancient Britain. Between skirmishes, Harry also learned how to use both a crossbow and the traditional longbow. It was during these more tranquil moments that the temporally-misplaced wizard also discovered a knack for feudal sport—specifically, jousting. A disguised Mortis also seemed to find the contests entertaining, as the pair won many wagers against their opponents.

Once 'Sir Black' completed his tour of duty, the wandering wizard found himself in 1893-era London, where he promptly met up with an experienced metaphysician named Abraham. Most interesting to Harry was the good doctor's somewhat hidden talent as a crypto zoologist, which was what lured him away from his practice. Upon questioning the man as to his worried appearance, he learned that

one of Abraham's former pupils cabled him regarding a friend's affliction by a strange illness, which the learned physician deduced to be a vampire attack.

Harry immediately offered his services as an experienced vampire hunter but, not willing to risk a confrontation with the Black family so close to his own time, he gave the man an alias that he had first heard amongst the vampire community—Gabriel Van Helsing.

The wizard soon discovered that he needed a larger collection of aliases, as the other man introduced himself as Abraham Van Helsing. Once the men got past that unexpected pitfall, Abraham and his newfound 'brother in arms' visited the patient. The Van Helsing confirmed that a vampire was responsible and, after reluctantly terminating the afflicted young woman, tracked the responsible creature back to its lair in Transylvania.

Much to Harry's shock, the trail led straight to an alternate version of his friend, the Count. Harry knew that he could not allow the creature before him to continue its wanton destruction, but he also pitied the good man he still sensed within the monster. Abraham, on the other hand, showed no such hesitation, immediately staking their opponent in the heart.

The Count did not perish in this attack, however, much to Abraham's vexation, and Harry took the opportunity to suggest an alternate course of action—one that he hoped would allow his friend to redeem himself. After discussing the details, Abraham agreed and Harry used his knowledge of blood rituals to bind the Count into the service of Abraham and his descendants.

Once the mission was complete, Harry saw Abraham home with a subdued master vampire before the group went their separate ways. Shortly thereafter, Harry's time expired and his journey continued. As he left the world behind, however, he vowed to study the original Count's contribution to his own genetics more closely. While he had mastered most of the skills that his latest foe had demonstrated, Harry thought that long-range Legilimency and shadow manipulation might prove useful.

His odyssey continued, introducing him to a wide variety of people and places needing his help. Be it futuristic societies and threats from technological foes, contemporary worlds and natural disasters,

or dimensions stuck in the past and under siege by magical means, Harry's terrible luck ensured that he encountered them all. While some circumstances took merely hours to resolve—such as a brief interlude to early twentieth century Egypt, where he saved a small family of British-American archaeologists by destroying a couple of mutated Inferi—others took significantly longer.

Finally, an indeterminate time and innumerable trips later, his journey mercifully ended and Harry found himself deposited back in his vacant Watchtower apartment. A quick glance at his watch assured him that he had returned to the very instant that the accident had taken place, ensuring that he left no noticeably trace of ever leaving. Breathing a huge sigh of relief at finally being where he intended, Harry carried out a plan long in the making.

First, he carefully removed the Universal Remote from his pocket and placed it in a simple box. He then proceeded to charm the container with every ward he had ever read about or seen, and a few more that he made up on the spot. A brief exertion of effort quickly had the container buried beneath the accumulated clutter of his trunk hopefully never to plague anyone—especially him—again.

Next, he silently Apparated to both Tim's and Raven's rooms and ensured that they were both well. Satisfied with their status, he ignored the late hour and Apparated straight to Kara's dormitory door. Pounding on the panel repeatedly eventually resulted in the blonde woman groggily answering his impromptu summons.

"J-Joe?" she questioned through a yawn, still half-asleep. "It's late. What's the matter?"

In reply, Harry re-enacted her...unique partnership proposal—several times. Afterwards, he seized the Argosian on either side of her waist, hoisted her up, and spun around several times in relief.

Needless to say, the...unique partnership proposal combined with the impression of a centrifuge succeeded in awakening the drowsy Supergirl. Unable to explain the suddenly rapt attention that she was receiving—welcome as it might be—Kara looked down at her boyfriend and smiled.

"Joe, you're acting like you haven't seen me in years."

Harry smiled a trifle ironically and simply replied, "I haven't, but I wanted to tell you that I'll go to your fan club meeting tomor...today, if you want me."

She looked confused. "Are you okay? Is everything alright?"

At the thoughts of the warded Remote concealed beneath his other possessions, his smile widened.

"Oh, yeah," Harry assured her. "Everything's great."

A/N: Thus concludes Chapter Thirteen of Terminal Justice, weighing in at a decent 9,000 words. No omakes in this update, but I did work in the accidental time/space odyssey suggestion discussed on CaerAzkaban, as well as another couple mistaken identities. All in all, the stage should be set for any number of amusing cameos and/or omakes. It's been my intention since I first started Terminal Justice to leave a few open endings for potential sequels, and I'm fairly happy with this particular method of accomplishing that goal.

Many thanks to James for proofreading this chapter, and to all the CaerAzkaban group members whose suggestions appear in this update.

Thank you for your interest, and please remember to review.

Previous Chapter
Terminal Justice

Chapter 13: Safari, So Good—or—The Beat Goes On
by Overkill

Next Chapter

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Chapter 14: The Day of Interruptions by Overkill

Next Chapter

After Harry bid Kara good night—both verbally and not—the wizard returned to his apartment with hopes of finally being able to rest without fear of temporal displacement during his slumber. His plan begun beautifully; he arrived back at his assigned dormitory without incident, and he arrived to find his trunk still securely warded. Swiftly changing into his sleepwear, Harry fell back onto his bed in repose. Everything well in hand, he closed his eyes as a relaxed sigh escaped his lips—

—Which promptly turned into a groan when his Zippo began vibrating.

Eyes still tightly shut, the immortal magician activated the device. "Yes?" he groaned questioningly.

"Hello, Mr. Black!" a far too perky feminine voice greeted.

"Henchgirl?" Harry mumbled sleepily. "Do you know what time it is?"

"Sure. It's 3AM here. Why? You haven't lost your watch, have you? Because if you did, we built in this function that makes it appear on your wrist when you whistle the funeral march."

Harry was desperately trying to convince himself not to reach through the Floo connection and throttle the witch. Finally succeeding in leashing his temper, he asked, "Funeral march?"

"Yeah, we chose that method so that you could use the feature discretely," the female inventor informed. "After all, who would whistle to summon his watch?"

"Do I even want to know why you chose the Funeral march?"

"I like Chopin," she admitted, "and it was one of the easiest to whistle. I tried the Revolutionary Etude, but it didn't work as well."

"I see," Harry yawned and wondered just why his was discussing music at three in the morning. "Thank you for the information. So... why did you call anyway?"

"I just needed to talk with a friend."

"Oh?"

"Yes. The Professor made fun of a spell I invented when I showed it to him, and I decided that maybe if I talk it over with you, I'll feel better."

"Maybe he wasn't all that nice because he wanted to go to sleep?" Harry prompted in a less than subtle manner.

"Why would he want that? I showed it to him just after dinner."

"Then why are you calling me now?"

"Oh, I didn't want to disturb you in case you were doing something important."

Harry slowly counted to ten, preparing himself for another no-doubt harebrained scheme. "I see. So, what was this spell you invented?"

"Well, I needed a spell to protect shoes from water. You see, I went shopping a few days ago and got caught by a rainstorm, which ruined my shoes. So, I wanted to make a spell to prevent that from happening the next time."

Harry blinked in disbelief. "That doesn't sound that bad."

"No, it isn't," Henchgirl agreed happily, before her tone grew subdued. "But I think that I made the spell a bit too powerful. I still had the rainstorm and my ruined shoes in mind—they were new, you see..."

He just could not help himself. "How can you make a spell like that too powerful?" he demanded curiously.

"Well... it does repel water like I wanted, but... it also kinda gives you the ability to walk on water."

And there was the other rapidly falling shoe, right on schedule.

"'Walk on water', huh?" Harry verified.

"Yeah." She sighed. "You can laugh now if you want."

"Why would I laugh? It sounds kinda fun, actually."

"You think so?"

"Sure," he assured his almost-sister. "In fact, I'll try it out first thing tom—"

"If I give you the incantation, can you try it now?" she interrupted pleadingly.

Harry sighed resignedly. "Sure."

"You want it? You really want it?" she exclaimed enthusiastically. "The parchment's on its way! Thanks, Mr. Black! I can't wait to tell the Professor that he was wrong!"

"Yes," Harry muttered darkly as memories of the Universal Remote drifted to his conscious mind, "neither can I. I'll contact you later, Henghgirl."

"Oke dokee!" Just before she disconnected, Harry could hear a squealed 'he liked it!'

Swallowing a cocktail mixture of Pepper-Up potion and coffee in lieu of sleep, Harry decided to test Henghgirl's aquatic spell in the same location as his submarine. After all, there was still some daylight left in Metropolis. With one last longing look at his unused bed, Harry charmed his shoes and Apparated to the Metropolis docks.

The wizard soon proved the inventor right on all counts as his shoes remained not only dry, but also above sea level. In no time at all, Harry was water skating away from the crowded wharf and towards the open sea. Approximately a half hour into his leisurely excursion, he happened upon a suspicious-looking ship. More specifically, his attention was drawn to a group of nasty-looking individuals on said ship who were, at that moment, in the process of throwing a very familiar-looking female reporter into the sea.

Not seeing even a remote glimpse of the big blue Boy Scout, Harry increased his pace and snatched the almost-drenched Lois Lane as she tumbled towards the ocean's surface.

"I somehow doubt that this is part of your daily swim workout," Harry commented to the woman in his arms as he made his way back to the docks.

"Fraid not," the brunette replied, before looking at him curiously. "What are you doing here, Mr. Black? Not that I'm not happy to see you, that is."

"Oh, I just went for a walk, decided to enjoy the fresh sea breeze. And I believe that I told you to call me 'Joe'."

"On a walk'?" she repeated dumbly, her eyes traveling to his feet. The feet that were inexplicably balanced on top of the rolling surf. "Right. On a walk. Why not? I've got nothing against going out for a walk." she added, a half octave higher than usual.

"So... who were your playmates?" Harry inquired.

"Oh, one of my sources contacted me about a gunrunning, drug smuggling operation. It sounded like a good story, so I snuck onto the ship. Unfortunately, they discovered me as I was trying to escape and decided to throw me overboard out here. It's too far to swim, and this way there's no awkward questions about how an accidental drowning victim caught a few bullets in the head."

"And you didn't think it wise to wait for your partner—who is incidentally bulletproof and can fly—before going after those people?"

"Martha called him back to Smallville for something, and I couldn't risk having the ship gone by the time he returned. So I took Jimmy Olsen with me as backup."

"I don't see him anywhere," Harry accused.

Lois looked away from him. "I might have told him to... stay on the docks."

"I'm sure that Clark's just going to love hearing how Jimmy Olsen is a suitable stand-in for him."

"Well, if those bozos hadn't found me, I would have had the story of the year. The decade, even!"

Harry pragmatically added, "And if I hadn't been here, Clark would have been right beside Aquaman and the rest of us scouring the seafloor for you. Do you have any idea what finding your corpse would do to him? Not to mention my own problems with determining in which afterlife you most belong. I'm pretty sure we don't have any guys with a newspaper schick in the Union, and I'd feel bad if I subjected the saints to endless interviews "

She went quiet for a moment in reflection. Once again, she came face-to-face with death, and very narrowly missed ending her mortal existence.

'Of course,' she mentally noted, 'I'm still face-to-face with Death, in a sense. Which reminds me...'

A sly smile appeared on her lips. "You know, I can still have that story of the year. If I could just get you to..."

Harry groaned inwardly. Any feeble hopes he had been nursing of the woman dropping her demands for an 'exclusive' evaporated. Of course, the mere idea that 'the Lois Lane' would ever turn down a story was a rather obvious indication that he needed sleep. Opting to employ a long-time gambit, he changed the topic. "You know, I really liked your karaoke performance at Halloween."

In hindsight, perhaps the change of topic was rather obvious, but it wasn't like he ever hid his lack of enthusiasm at the interview notion.

"Umm... thanks. Don't you think it was rather strange, how the machine chose our songs?"

"No. Why do you ask?" Harry carefully maintained his poker face—just like he did when Lois took the stage that night and received 'I Need a Hero' to sing. Thinking back, there seemed to be a sudden rash of coughing and red faces when the reporter reached the 'needing a superman to sweep her off her feet' part.

Lois gave him a long searching look. Much to his inner relief, the straight face held. Of course, the fact that he had a straight face was probably a little suspect, but at least he wouldn't be attacked over it.

Apparently, she agreed with him, for she let the matter drop and instead voiced, "By the way, I had no idea you had such a great singing voice."

"Oh, that. Well, singing is sorta part-and-parcel of the whole 'angel' gig. To be completely honest, I felt a bit like I was cheating because of it."

"It wasn't a contest," she assured him.

"Oh, I know. If it had been, I'd have never competed—no matter how much Kara nagged me. It just wouldn't have been fair." Catching sight of an antsy redheaded photographer, Harry added, "Oh, look! Here we are."

Putting on a burst of speed, Harry jumped the dock wall as they approached and landed a few feet shy of the fidgeting Jimmy Olsen.

"Lois!" said teenager exclaimed as soon as Harry lowered the reporter to the ground. "I was just about to call for Superman."

"Were you, now?" the wizard asked as he gave Lois a pointed look. "How very responsible of you."

"Er, thank you, Sir. I..." The photographer looked his colleague for assistance.

"Oh, right, you don't know each other. Well, you don't know Joe, anyway. Joe, this is Jimmy Olsen, our brilliant photographer and future reporter for the Daily Planet. Jimmy, this is Joe Black. He is... he is..." she paused as she looked for away to summarize her rescuer.

"I'm just a guy on vacation," Harry finished with a smile—which quickly grew somewhat mischievous. "Of course, I nearly had to cut it short due to certain swimming lessons someone decided to take." Lois received a second pointed look, which she seemed to shrug off as easily as the first.

"Swimming lessons'?" Jimmy echoed, now completely confused. "Are you... wait a minute. How did you come here?"

"Pardon?"

"I just realized. It looked as if you were walking on the water."

Harry nodded. "That might be because I was. There's nothing to it, really."

The boy stared at Harry wide eyed.

"Err... I don't suppose you could do that again so I can take a picture?" the redhead finally managed to ask, reaching for his camera.

"I'd rather you didn't," the wizard answered honestly. "I've heard that taking photos of me brings bad luck, so perhaps its better if you don't try."

"I could..."

"Jimmy!" Lois cut in with her best 'I'll explain later' look. "Put away the camera. I don't think any of us are in mood for a photo session. Let's just get back to the Planet so I can finish writing my article."

The teenager blinked. "Uh... sure, Lois. We can go."

Her mention of the story jogged Harry's mind and sent his hand reaching into his coat pocket. "Lois, about that text you had me translate for your article... I've had a lot of time on my hands recently, and I was going through some of my old things when I found a couple of items that you might find inspiring."

He withdrew his hand, producing a small stone box decorated with Aztec carvings. The wizard had bought the thing for almost nothing in some souvenir shop during his travels, and was glad to finally find a use for it. Harry just hoped that Lois would appreciate the joke connected with the box's contents.

During one of his sabbaticals on Black Island, the magician was experimenting with his mage sight ability. He had hoped to duplicate the effects of Mad-Eye Moody's false eye, as the battered old man

had won many duels due to his dubious advantage. He already knew how to identify spell craft, which made spotting invisible targets or seeing through illusions quite simple. He soon learned, however, that seeing through solid objects took much more focused concentration. His persistence eventually won out, and he managed to manipulate his magical sight in such a fashion. This achievement led to him learning two important facts.

One, a wizard should never attempt to look through certain types of wards, if his sudden migraine was any indication. Fortunately for him, a dozen-strong band of Veela found him shortly thereafter and volunteered to 'nurse him back to health'. Several of them even produced nurses' outfits for the occasion and, though they employed certain... unorthodox tactics, they did cure his headache.

The other fact was discovered later, when he decided to ask the Doctor how magical implants such as Moody's eye were made, and if they could penetrate wards. Unfortunately, the woman approached the explanation in a rather enthusiastic manner. After explaining—at length—the various charms that could be grafted to magical prosthesis, she decided to teach him how to make the magical eyes himself in the event that he ever needed the knowledge.

The witch found it highly amusing to watch Harry attempt the process, turning out one faulty optic after another. She found it less amusing when he succeeded on his fortieth attempt, and the woman finally confessed that it usually took apprentice mediwitches at least a year and several thousand attempts to produce a fully functional eye.

Harry rewarded the woman's attempt at garnering a laugh at his expense by connecting the failed attempts into a necklace, putting it on the Doctor's neck with a Sticking Charm, and setting the removal trigger in Parseltongue.

For some odd reason, the witch was less than pleased at the reversal of fortunes. After she wore it for a day, Harry took pity on her and removed it. Somehow, the 'original postmodern jewelry'—as the Professor dubbed the macabre item—got thrown in with his other belongings.

Oh, well, at least he found someone who could have a laugh at it.

"Thank you, Joe."

"Don't mention it," Harry instructed. "Now, it was nice to see you again, but I've got a bit of business left to take care of—" he gestured at the ocean "—so I'll wish you a good day. Bye!" Farewell given, he back flipped off the pier and began skating back out to sea, leaving the two Daily Planet employees to their own devices.

While Jimmy was staring in disbelief at the receding figure, Lois was inspecting the stone box. The very heavy stone box which could contain just about everything, considering that it was one of Mr. Black's 'old things'. She was seriously considering having Clark x-ray the container before she opened it. Then again, she didn't get where she was today by restraining her curiosity.

After she peaked into the box, her face took on a greenish tint. Perhaps she should have waited on her Kryptonian partner after all.

Apparently, her distress was noticeable enough to rouse Jimmy's attention. "What is it, Lois? Is something wrong?"

"Take a look for yourself," she invited.

Jimmy looked into the box where he saw a necklace of twenty pairs of human eyes, all impaled on a cord. He handed the box back to Lois, walked a few steps to the water, turned away, and got sick—

—Which was how Clark found them a few moments later when he surreptitiously landed and changed back into his non-caped suit.

"Hey, you two. I asked after you around the newsroom and they sent me here." Taking in their less-than-stellar states, the adopted Kent asked, "Did something happen? Are you two all right?"

"Jimmy's fine," Lois reassured her significant other. "He just not quite ready to be a field reporter yet. I don't suppose that I can blame him this time, though."

"What happened?"

"I'll get into the details later, but the skinny is like this. When you said at the girls' birthday party that it's better not to ask... I think I

know why." She handed him Mr. Black's box, knowing without a doubt that he was going to look through it.

Sure enough, the Man of Steel seemed slightly queasy after examining the carton.

"My thoughts exactly," she stated.

The group made their way back to the office but, just as they were about to enter the Planet, a faraway sound registered in the superhuman's enhanced ear.

While Jimmy continued on inside, Lois noticed Clark's reduced pace.

"I need to go," he told the woman discretely.

"Again? What is it this time?"

"A distress call from a ship just an hour away from Metropolis. Apparently, one of the old blockade mines from World War 2 broke loose from its mooring and collided with the ship. He listened again. "Better make that two mines."

As the man prepared to duck into an alley, Lois laid a hand on his arm. "Before you go, you'd better hear about the rest of my time with Mr. Black."

After thoroughly testing out Henchgirl's new charm, Harry Apparated back to his room aboard the Watchtower. The spell seemed to work as intended, but he did have one question for the inventive witch. He realized that he should have probably asked before trying out the spell, but since he didn't... well, no time like the present.

"Henchgirl!" he called into the Zippo.

"Mr. Black? Have you tried the spell? Did it work? Whatdya think? Huh? Huh? Huh?"

"Yes, I did, and it works great, Henchgirl. One question, though; how long does it take to wear off?"

"Oh, it doesn't."

"It doesn't?" he asked dully.

"Nope! Of course, if you concentrate on it, you can temporally suppress it I suppose, but why bother? I mean, what good is a shoe-protecting spell if you constantly have to check whether it was still working all the time?"

"Err... right. Thanks, that's all I wanted to know. Oh, and Henchgirl?"

"Yes?"

"Next time, could you just simply use a water repelling potion or something?"

With Henchgirl satisfied, Harry once more fell back onto his bed in hopes of resting. Like the last time, however, a female acquaintance had other plans.

A loud knocking on his door reverberated throughout the room, causing him to briefly consider implementing a 'hex first, question later' policy. He reconsidered, however, and opened the portal to find Kara dressed in full uniform.

"Oh, good, you're already dressed," the Argosian greeted. "We better get going. I promised to help Barb look for some new shoes in Gotham, then you and I have that appointment in Japan after lunch. After that, you're supposed to be meeting with Clark to plant Kandor City on Argo while Raven and I go with Diana and her younger sister to Themyscira."

Harry blinked. "You and Raven are going where to do what?"

"Yeah, didn't I tell you?" Kara asked. "I know I meant to. Anyway, the Amazons are throwing some sort of tournament/festival thing and Diana invited a few of us to attend. Her little sister Donna apparently did the same for Raven and her Tamaranian friend. I think it's their mom's way of opening up to the outside world."

"A worthy goal, but I wouldn't have thought that a sporting event would interest Raven," Harry admitted.

Kara shrugged. "Well, Donna did mention something about an ancient library on the island..."

The wizard nodded. "Ah, now I understand. Well, I hope you all have fun."

"Don't worry," she said. "I'll keep an eye on her."

Harry's lips twitched, causing Kara to look at him curiously.

"What is it?"

Harry just shook his head before locking his door behind them. "Well, I bumped into Lois earlier..."

Diana placed her tiara on the workbench before running both hands through her hair in frustration. Once again, they were ensconced in her boyfriend's subterranean lair, searching for a scientific explanation for their new colleague's susceptibility to coffee. Thus far, their labors had been in vain.

"It's almost as if coffee possesses some unique magical property that he is vulnerable to," she thought out loud, "something to make its effects stronger on him than anyone else." The Amazon was suddenly stricken with an idea. "Almost like how red kryptonite affects Kal, just not to the same degree."

Bruce looked at her as he debated the notion with himself. "That might be a possibility," he admitted. "Kryptonite affects Kryptonians so strongly because it originated from their birthplace. Perhaps coffee somehow possesses a similar link with the Archangels' point of origin."

"But, how can that be?"

"Holy water," the World's Greatest Detective suddenly realized. "It isn't a well known fact, but coffee was originally an Arabic drink that spread to Venice, Italy, in the mid seventeenth century. It wasn't well received by the common folk until Pope Clement VIII blessed the coffee as an acceptable Christian beverage. It was also rumored that the Vatican's coffee supply was initially brewed with holy water, for one reason or another."

"What are you saying?" Diana asked, unable to grasp his point.

"Well, the Pope is supposedly God's representative on Earth, and their dogma explicitly states that what the Church binds on Earth will be bound in Heaven. Even though coffee is no longer brewed with holy water, perhaps that symbolic gesture centuries ago had a more-than-symbolic impact on beings such as angels and archangels."

"Would he not have the same reaction to holy water itself, then?"

Bruce shrugged. "Holy water is rarely drunk, but I suppose the possibility exists." He cocked his head as another thought occurred to him. "This might explain why I never saw Jason Blood drink coffee until recently; perhaps it's simply been too toxic for demons to accommodate the last four centuries."

"And it gives celestial beings an enormous energy boost?" Diana hazarded a guess. At the Dark Knight's nod, she grew contemplative. "This knowledge could prove very useful the next time we face demonic forces. I certainly wished I knew of this when Shayera and I journeyed to Tartarus."

The unmasked detective nodded in agreement. "In any event, I believe that this situation deserves a closer examination; I will instruct Barbara and Dick to take over for me today."

Diana looked ready to object. "But, without a demon here to study, what further tests could you possibly—?"

Bruce interrupted the tirade by rubbing the statuesque woman's shoulders. "That wasn't the situation that I'm referring to."

"Oh?" Diana asked before the reality of their situation dawned on her. "Oh. Ohhh!"

Kara held onto Harry tightly as they flew on his motorbike high above the ground—and away from prying eyes. It was not as if she were afraid to fall—she could always dismount the bike and maintain the same altitude and pace under her own power if she so desired—but it seemed almost criminal to waste an excuse to cuddle with her boyfriend. Her day was brightened even further by his willingness to attend her planned shopping excursion. His presence would be a great help to her, as she doubted that Dick Grayson could single-

handedly carry around the many purchases the two girls planned on obtaining.

Seeing as how the two had been planning this trip for over a week, it came as a shock to Kara when she spotted Barbara perched atop Wayne Tower in her Batgirl costume.

"Are we early?" the Argosian inquired of her friend once Harry had landed the motorbike. "I thought you said ten o'clock."

"I did," Barbara said huffily. "Batman called not twenty minutes ago and ordered Nightwing and I to patrol Gotham today, as he and Wonder Woman have more research to complete."

"Tough luck," Kara said sympathetically.

"Tell me about it," the redhead grouched, "and don't even get me started on their choice of relationship tactics. I mean... a scientific study in the Batcave? Give me a break!"

The blonde extraterrestrial smiled. "By the way, Barb, I want you to meet Joe."

Harry smiled. "Actually, we've already met briefly. Admittedly, we were a bit too preoccupied for a more formal introduction. Joe Black, at your service," he introduced himself before extending his hand.

"Barbara Gordon," the lithe crime fighter returned while giving him an incredulous look.

Before any of the trio could comment further, they were joined by the costumed Dick Grayson, whom now called himself Nightwing. "We've got trouble," he announced in lieu of a more formal greeting.

Harry hid a smile. Definitely a Batman tactic, if ever there was one.

"Really?" Barbara asked, perking up slightly. "Gotham's been almost completely trouble-free, ever since—" she glanced sideways at Harry—"that night."

"She's not quite that degree of trouble, thankfully," the domino-masked man supplied.

"She?" Harry asked curiously.

"Roxy Rocket," Dick informed. "Her real name is—"

"Roxanne Sutton," Harry interrupted as he mentally reviewed the League's files. "Formerly a Hollywood stunt double that lost her job after intentionally making her stunts too dangerous. She's a thrill junkie and minor thief, but her crimes are essentially benign."

"Uh... yeah," the other man eloquently replied. "Anyway, I just saw something that looked remarkably like her rocket flying between some buildings a couple miles east of here."

"Yeah, she can be a real pain sometimes," Barbara confessed to her best female friend. "She just loves flirting with death."

Starting at the girl's offhanded comment, Harry turned to the blonde at his side. "Uh... Kara? I swear that I've never even spoken to the woman in my life, much less done anything else," he pleaded, to the accompaniment of Dick's sudden coughing fit.

"She'd better hope so, Mister, or I'll be forced to have a word with her."

Meanwhile, Barbara Gordon was growing increasingly confused. She opened her mouth in preparation to rectify the situation, but she was interrupted by the searing screech of a rocket weaving daringly through the skyscrapers around their perch.

Harry smirked, suddenly reminded of his own exploits on a broom.

"I'll admit that she does seem to like baiting death," Kara acknowledged as the redheaded woman atop the strange rocket performed another audacious maneuver.

"There's only one slight problem with that," Harry added as he remounted his motorbike. "I don't like being baited. Excuse me for a moment."

He took off in hot pursuit of the flying Gothamite, leaving behind a dumbstruck Batgirl, a concerned Nightwing, and a slightly scowling Supergirl.

Once Roxy noticed that she was being tailed, she began wildly slaloming between the buildings at a speed no human had any business traveling. After a few repetitions with no noticeably decrease in her lead, Harry decided to take a shortcut. He quickly made both Mortis and himself intangible, then guided the Pooka through any solid obstacles in their path.

As he gained on the voluptuous daredevil, Harry noticed that she began smiling even brighter at his progress. He sighed in resignation before casting the Impediment Jinx on the woman's vehicle, causing it to immediately pause in midair. A Hover Charm ensured that the suddenly propulsion-less machine wouldn't plummet to the ground.

"We need to talk," he announced as Mortis brought him face to face with the somewhat infamous Roxy Rocket.

"Do we?" the attractive villainess demanded archly, before taking in the sight before her. "You know, you're a pretty good opponent. I was kinda hoping for Batman to pick up my trail, but you may prove even better... So, Cute Stuff, up for a game of Follow the Leader?"

"Thanks, but no thanks," Harry replied. "I've had more than my fill of chases in my life, against a wide range of opponents. I'm afraid that, compared to them, our tame little competition was quite dull."

Her face fell. "Dull? Then maybe you could give me another chance? You'd see that I—"

"Would be just as easy to catch a second time. What do you hope to get out of it, anyway?"

"The thrill, the excitement, the... oh, don't you understand?"

Harry smiled slightly. "Yes, I know the pleasure that a nice adrenaline rush can give. I can also see quite clearly that you've become addicted to it." Harry mentally read through her profile again. "You also steadily require bigger and bigger doses of danger, isn't that right?"

"Why do you care? It's my business."

"Oh, I care a great deal when you endanger others on your little jaunts."

"How else do you think I could get a real thrill? Those movie producers don't want me to take any real risk; they insist on having a backup of a backup all the time, so I gotta get people to chase me for kicks. Now, how can I get somebody to chase me if I don't get their attention first?"

Harry considered her reply for a moment. "So... what happens when it can't get any more exciting?"

"What do you mean?" Roxy asked.

"What will you do when you finally reach the point of having done it all?"

"That'll never happen!" she dismissed his question. "As long as I survive, I can dare death even more next time. So, there's no way that I can reach the ultimate thrill and live."

"So, you're saying the ultimate thrill is when you finally can't cheat death, and he finally catches you?" Harry asked slyly.

"Yes, basically... Wait! 'He'?"

"Yes, 'he'," Harry repeated, "or in this case, 'me'. Because guess what—I just caught you, and you're still alive."

"What?" she looked startled and for the first time looked closer at the man in front of her.

For the Gothamite's benefit, Harry shifted his clothes into a black hooded robe and called his scythe to his hand. Mortis, catching onto his owner's intent, transformed himself to his native equestrian form.

Roxy's eyes widened comically.

"Death, at your service," Harry added sarcastically.

"But... but... how... why... I mean..." the stunt woman verbally stumbled over herself at the sheer shock of the personage facing her.

"Irony, isn't it?" Harry noted. "You just lived through the self-professed highlight of your existence, and you never even realized it."

"So, this is it, then?" she finally managed to voice. "You've finally come for me?"

"Oh, no, just after you," Harry corrected. "You are still very much alive and will remain so for a while longer."

"Then why did you chase me?"

"Oh, you interrupted my conversation with some friends—and face it; you were trying to draw attention to yourself."

"You're here because I interrupted your conversation?" she asked disbelievingly.

Harry smiled at her confusion. "Were you perhaps expecting a declaration of war against my arch-enemy, for all the times you escaped me?"

The redhead shrugged sheepishly. "Well..."

"Rest assured that I've only ever had one real arch-enemy, and I packed him off to Hell ages ago."

"But... but what am I to do now?" the woman finally managed to ask in a lost tone.

"You're a talented young woman, I'm sure you'll find other exciting jobs that don't involve committing felonies. After all, don't you think you've been going easy on yourself?"

"What do you mean?" she asked, seemingly hurt by the accusation.

"I mean that all of this—" Harry waved a hand at her rocket and its saddlebags "—is scripted. You always plan ahead, prepare things in advance, choose a time... it's all very predictable. If you wanted a real challenge, you should try operating on the other side of the law. Look at the superheroes, for example—they never know when or where trouble will strike. They have to be ready on a moment's

notice, improvise all the time—all the while wondering who's going to attack them next. Now, that's a real thrill. What you've been doing is an organized nature hike through life—they're in the survival camp."

Roxy's eyes lit up at the new possibilities. "You really think so?"

"Sure, I've seen them in action; their jobs know neither day nor hour. It's too bad that you prefer the easy way—I could see you working alongside them."

"Wait a minute! Who said that I preferred the easy way?"

Harry smiled again. "Well, your track record pretty much speaks for itself."

"What if I decided to change my ways? It's not too late, is it?"

"Well, I don't know..." Harry made a show of considering the issue. "Have you done anything incriminating lately?"

"Uh... if you don't count this stolen manuscript from the university, and the chase right now? Not really."

"Okay... how about this? You give me the manuscript and I'll return it for you, stressing that the theft was just a terrible misunderstanding. In return, I'll okay it with the Bat family for you to be Gotham's defender for today. If you manage that, then I'll believe that you can really change. In fact," he added, "I might even have an opening for an agent in my organization. You ought to know, though, that it can be one of the most dangerous jobs out there."

"You mean it?" she asked eagerly.

"Absolutely. So, what will it be?"

She tossed him a bag. "Here's the manuscript. You've got yourself a deal, on one condition."

"And what would that be?"

"I don't want any special treatment just because I work for you. If I'm supposed to get killed by something, then I'm getting killed by it,

alright? I don't want to lose the thrill of the hunt because I have you in my back pocket."

Harry nodded in agreement. "All right, no preferential treatment. I promise."

"Great!" Roxy said in a chipper tone before she looked over the side of her rocket at the nothingness holding her up. "Say... you wouldn't mind releasing me now, would you? I had best get started."

"Not at all." Harry lowered her onto a nearby rooftop before fishing out a spare Zippo from his pocket. "Use this if you need to reach me. Just light it and call for 'Mr. Black' and I will hear you. Good luck!"

Harry tipped his hat at the redhead's departure, then turned Mortis around and returned to his friends.

Just as Barbara Gordon was beginning to come to terms with the rooftop exchange she had witnessed, she spotted Kara's 'boyfriend' galloping back on a translucent horse, wearing a hooded robe, and holding a scythe in one hand.

"Chateaufort du Pape, 1973," Dick whispered in her ear.

"What?"

"I've found it to be the best cure for a run-in with Mr. Black's... other side. There's still a few bottles left in the manor's wine cellar."

"Great," she groaned in relief. 1973. She'd have to keep that in mind.

"What took you, Joe?" she heard Kara ask. "And what's with the business suit?"

"Err... sorry about that. Forgot to change." Harry reverted to his casual clothing and shed the scythe as he dismounted Mortis, who once again assumed the form of a motorbike.

"Is she...?" Nightwing started asking in worried tone.

"She's fine," Harry assured him. "In fact, you have today off again once we return this manuscript to the university."

"Pardon?"

"I... pointed a few things out to her, and she decided that she needed an occupational change. She's filling in for you today as an audition of sorts."

"An audition for what? Or who?" Barbara asked.

"For me, or rather, for a field agent position of mine. I think she has a lot of potential, if she can control that adrenaline addiction of hers."

Kara grinned. "I knew I could count on you, Joe. Now we can go shopping after all!"

"Well, at least you've got your priorities straight," Harry replied, his grin matching hers.

Their exchange put true horror into Dick's features. Even then, he registered when Barbara leaned into him and whispered, "How do you think Superman is taking the idea of those two together?"

Bruce Wayne's adopted son turned to take in the pair, who were now playfully wrestling around in mid-air.

"I'm not sure, but I'd imagine that Bruce has something in the wine cellar for him, too."

After the group finished their errands and purchased Barbara her new shoes—along with several other accessories that both Dick and Harry agreed were unnecessary—the two groups separated. While the Gothamites returned to Wayne Manor, Kara insisted on a round-the-world race to Japan, rather than the more expedient Apparation or teleporter trip. Events progressed in their typical manner, which led to a... spirited conversation between the pair as they landed in front of the convention hall in Tokyo.

"Admit it, Joe," the blonde Argosian insisted, "we could have been here five minutes ago if you had just stopped for directions."

"I didn't need directions," the wizard replied shortly, "because I knew exactly where we were."

"Then why were you in-route to China?"

Harry shrugged. "Maybe because you said China?"

"I did not. I said Japan."

"Japan. China. What's the difference?"

"You mean, besides a distance of several hundred miles, a couple major landmarks, an additional ocean... and the small fact that one is part of a continent while the other's a chain of islands?"

"Precisely," Harry answered in a vindicated tone. "Besides those minor trivialities, the two are quite similar."

"Sure they are," Kara conceded, "and look! Here comes the welcoming committee."

"Huh?" Harry intelligently inquired before being swamped in pre-teenaged girls. "A little help?" he nearly begged as he was besieged by the costumed flock. A few of the Oriental Supergirl duplicates actually managed to scale his superior height and were hanging from his arms, while the rest of their companions did their best to tackle the wizard.

"What did you tell them?" Harry demanded as the anxious group's volume unbelievably increased as they began peppering him with questions from all directions.

"How old are you?" "Are you two getting married?" "Do you have any kids?" "Can you show us real magic?" "Did Izanami really create Death as revenge for her husband seeing her all decayed and stuff when she died?" "Why did you follow travelers at night, Okuri-inu?" "My brother doesn't believe that you're real. Can you turn into a black wolf and bite him or something?"

The assaulted magician just glared at the blonde Argosian, who did not even display enough decorum to hide her mirth. A persistent tugging on his coat summoned a slight growl from his clenched teeth—which was rather ineffective, as one of the more limber of the group started making a rather intense survey of his lengthened incisors from her perch atop his shoulder.

Kara laughed harder.

Once Clark returned from cleaning up the shipwreck—which, as he had come to expect from Mr. Black's involvement, was completely unsalvageable—his first stop was to check on the one and only Lois Lane. It was fortunate that he did so, as he found the female reporter sitting at her desk in a complete daze.

Seeing his arrival, Lois turned to face him. "It's all true, isn't it?"

Clark nodded, slightly amused at her unprecedented level of shock.

"He really is Death Incarnate."

"Among a host of other things," Clark agreed calmly, having already accepted the man's... unique background.

"It's a lot to take in, you know?" she asked rhetorically. "One on hand, you have this really nice guy who helped decorate for our Halloween party, sings karaoke, is addicted to coffee, is dating your baby cousin, saved your dad's life—how's he doing, by the way?"

"That's what Ma wanted to talk about earlier. She took Pa to Doc Frye's clinic yesterday for a cardiogram, which came back completely clean; they say that his heart and arteries are better now than they've been in forty years. The doctors are calling it a miracle."

"See what I mean? He saved your dad's life yesterday and mine earlier today, and I can't figure out why. I mean, he's Death! He's got the highest uncontested kill tally of any being in the entire universe! For crying out loud, he just gave me a necklace made out of human eyes!"

Clark shrugged. "Well, it's the thought that counts, right? Besides, Kara explained it all for us once, and some other research we've done agrees with her. As best we can understand, Mr. Black doesn't kill nearly as many beings as most sources would have you believe. In fact, he even occasionally relents on the decent people of the world, like he did with Pa. For the majority, he just aids the transition after they die."

"But then why are there so many stories about how evil he is?"

"I can't answer that, Lois; none of us can, save him. All I know is that history is rarely kind, and it's often subjective. Now, we do have pretty conclusive proof that several 'accidents' are far too coincidental—Mr. Black has even committed a few murders in front of League witnesses. But every time we've investigated the circumstances, every last person he's ever gone after has always done something truly unconscionable. That's why our best guess is that, aside from Death, he's also some sort of vengeance agent. In every documented case, it's as if his... clients have done something to damn themselves to hell, and Mr. Black exists to make sure they get there."

Lois considered what she had just learned. "Well, I can certainly understand that point of view, but that doesn't really sound like the makings of a hero, more like a lawless murderer or vigilante. Why did you guys admit him to the League?"

"I actually talked to him shortly after he joined and questioned him on his behavior," Clark admitted. "He's given me a lot to think about, both that night and on many occasions since then. When I look over the world we live in today, I sometimes wonder if he doesn't have the right idea after all. I mean, at the end of the day, what have I really accomplished?"

"What are you on about, Smallville?" Lois demanded incredulously. "You've saved the world dozens of times."

"But what was the point, Lois? How many times did I put away Luthor, or Metallo, or Parasite—only to have them escape from prison and destroy more innocent lives? I've had the opportunity to finish each and every one of them—dozens of times—but I've always hesitated, I've always trusted that the system might finally reach them if I just gave them one more chance. But with Mr. Black, he does what must be done... what no one else will do."

Lois put a hand on the man's shoulder. "You did the right thing by sparing them. You always do."

"Do I really?" Clark honestly asked. "Because I'm not so certain anymore. Sure, his methods are even darker than Bruce's at his worst, but he gets results. A couple of weeks ago, Alfred almost died of an untreatable disease, and Bruce promised Mr. Black whatever he wanted if only he'd spare Alfred's life. He accepted and restored

Alfred to perfect health. In payment, Black collected the worst of Batman's rogue gallery like Two-Face, Riddler, and Scarecrow. For some reason, he left the Joker completely paralyzed from the waist down but otherwise alive."

"So that's what happened to them," Lois realized. "I had wondered why things seemed so quiet over there."

The Man of Steel nodded. "Within twenty four hours, felonious crime in Gotham dropped 95 percent. Batman's been trying to accomplish that for the past couple decades, and Mr. Black cleaned up the entire city in a single night—and it doesn't stop with just Gotham. We've noticed a significant drop in major crimes planet wide, given how many super villains we know are still at large. All the data we've reviewed and the criminal informants we've questioned give the same explanation—most of the criminals that have repeatedly taken advantage of our past leniency are now laying low, out of fear of committing a crime grave enough to earn Mr. Black's notice."

"I've seen the statistics, and everyone agrees that things are safer than they've been in a long time... but isn't this the sort of thing that you said led to the Justice Lords?"

"I know that, Lois. Believe me, I know; those versions of us didn't—or couldn't—use their power responsibly... but somehow, Mr. Black has avoided that trap. He does whatever it takes, eliminates the true dangers to humanity, and yet never crosses that last thin line from dark hero to villain. The general population isn't terrified of him the way that they were of the Justice Lords, and he's done nothing to harm the innocent in any way. In fact, he's even been rehabilitating a couple of people that we had considered beyond hope."

"And that," Clark stated in a tone of finality, "is why Mr. Black is part of the Justice League. He may not always follow the letter of the law, but he does uphold its spirit."

"Careful, Clark," a male voice cautioned dryly. "You'll make me blush."

The two whirled around to find Harry reclining in another desk chair no further than ten feet from their huddle.

"Umm... Hello, Mr. Black," Lois greeted, before subtly attempting to discover how much he overheard. "I hope you haven't been waiting long."

Harry sighed. "We're back to 'Mr. Black' already? I thought this issue was already resolved. To answer your question, however... no, I haven't. I popped in around about the time Clark started stroking my ego. And for the record? I think you behave honorably—hopelessly naive and overly idealistic at times, but honorably all the same. If it makes you feel better, I used to believe just as you do... a few lifetime's ago. Such innocence became... unrealistic."

"If that's how you feel, then why stop with just a few criminals? Why not go after them all?" Lois could not help but ask.

Silence stretched between them for several moments.

"I'll kill in a fight," the wizard finally admitted. "I'll kill those who truly deserve it, and I won't look back—but I won't kill someone before they've earned it just because I know what they will do in the future."

"Why not?" she asked.

"There's a... separation, a line between us and them," Harry eventually explained. "It may not be as thin as most people think, but it's still a difficult line to walk." He smiled sadly. "And someone has to walk it." Forcibly brightening his expression, the wizard asked, "So... how's tricks?"

Getting the unspoken message to change the topic, she replied, "I'm fine. What can the Daily Planet do for you?"

Smiling, the wizard said, "Actually, I was wondering if Clark could come out and play."

"Huh?" Lois fluently inquired.

"I just escaped from the ambush that Kara set up with her hormonal pack of midget minions—I'm never doing that again, by the way—and was wondering when you wanted to do that little construction project," Harry prompted.

"Oh! Right! Sorry, I forgot," Clark blurted, still embarrassed at being caught gossiping by Death of all people. The situation was worsened further by Mr. Black being the topic of discussion as well. "We can leave now, if you wish. By the way, these are for you." The reporter handed Harry a closed paper sack.

Investigating, the wizard discovered what appeared to be a batch of homemade cookies. Harry looked at the Kryptonian curiously.

"Ma wanted you to have those," Clark replied to the nonverbal question.

Harry nodded. "That was nice of her. I'll have to drop by and thank her later." He retrieved a couple of the confections and offered the bag to the reporting team.

Grabbing the most chocolate-covered cookie in the parcel, Lois inserted, "Well, let's get going." At the pair of questioning glances, she added, "What? You're about to establish contact with a supposedly dead civilization. Surely you didn't think that I'd just wait here, did you?"

Clark looked at Harry as if to say, 'What can you do?'

The magician shrugged in reply and hopped out of his commandeered chair. "S'alright with me. Shall we?"

The roar of the female crowd silenced by Queen Hippolyta's raised hand. "As you know," the Amazonian monarch began, "today marks the beginning of our annual harvest festival. This year, however, we are honored by the presence of our warrior sisters from beyond Themyscira's shores. I ask that you welcome them among you for the first—but, hopefully, not the last—time."

The enthroned blonde queen paused for a moment and surveyed the eager combatants vying for the honor of the best warrior on the island, as well as the curious gazes of the foreign visitors.

"All of you have been training hard this past year to prepare for this day... for the title of Champion of the Island." Hippolyta sat down. "Let it begin," she ordered.

Cheers erupted in anticipation as dozens of armed women filed into the arena. Their forms bore many varying styles of armor, and the majority carried swords and shields—though a few possessed simpler weapons such as spears and nets.

The new arrivals spread out on the field of battle and glared at their opponents.

With nothing more than a wave from their queen, the warriors sprung into action.

"So, Lois, do you think that you've got enough material for a Page One now?" Harry asked a trifle testily.

Thanks to a couple of Apparations and an Engorgement Charm, Harry had the shrunken city of Kandor restored on Argo's surface in a matter of moments. The trio then met with the city's council and apprised them of the situation. Due in large part to Clark's previous conversations with the other Kryptonians, the session did not last nearly as long as Harry initially feared, and the wizard prepared himself to return back to Earth.

Until, of course, Lois's journalistic fervor completely overwhelmed her, inspiring the violet-eyed woman to ask several questions of Argo's new inhabitants. The interviews started simply enough, mere inquiries into the Kryptonian way of life and how the city came to be stolen by Brainiac years prior.

Harry smiled as the woman's inquiry resulted in an uneasy Clark being named an 'honored guest' as the Savior of Krypton. In fact, Harry's amusement at the other man's latest case of hero worship lasted until the sharp-tongued woman exposed his own level of involvement with the city's restoration.

Not for the first time, Harry wondered if he could justify some sort of 'accident' for his two companions as the leaders of Kandor very nearly genuflected in worship. Considering the identical smirks the duo were sporting—though Clark at least attempted to conceal his grin—the wizard was positive that journalists were an evil blight worthy of extermination.

Well, except for the Lovegoods, of course. Some of the time, anyway.

With much regret, Harry learned that word traveled fast in the extraterrestrial city, as the populace demonstrated no restraint in their demonstrations of appreciation during the trio's tour of the municipality—hence the wizard's ire at a particular female reporter of his acquaintance.

"Yeah, that should do it," Lois idly replied to his sarcastic inquiry as she finished yet another notebook.

"Fantastic!" Harry grumbled. "Bye, now," he irritably said to the closest Kryptonian groupies before returning the pair to Clark's icy fortress post haste.

Bidding the duo farewell—however insincerely the comment may have been given—he Apparated back to the Watchtower.

Perhaps this time, he might finally catch a few moments' rest.

"Why do we not attack them now?" the flaxen female companion demanded with barely concealed impatience. "Hippolyta and her little entourage are already distracted. You can sneak in and free Lord Hades right now. Then we three will finally have our revenge on those self-righteous Amazons."

"Patience, child," the broad-shouldered man ordered. "All things come in their own time. Your former peers are not to be taken lightly. Now, Aresia, go forth and do as your god commands. Be wary, for if you fail me in this, your punishment will be... severe. Never forget who it was who saved you from death at the hands of your former friends."

"I will succeed," the disgraced Amazon known as Aresia pledged. "You have my oath, Lord Ares." The woman turned and left their hiding place stealthily. Her male companion tarried a moment longer in observance of the formalized combat before he, too, withdrew towards his objective.

"Well done, Sisters," Hippolyta exclaimed after the finalists were selected. "You have all fought bravely and acquitted yourselves honorably. Now, today's final match will be held between—"

"The two of us," Aresia interrupted as she strode into view. "By Amazonian law, I have the right to challenge you for the throne."

"You lost that right when you violated our laws," the Amazonian queen asserted as a troop of guards encircled the blonde challenger. "You forfeited any and all rights to the name Amazon."

Aresia sneered. "I did what our laws demand, what you've grown too weak to do. Mankind is a plague that must be wiped out if we are to survive."

"I do not understand," Starfire admitted confusedly to Raven. "Has she too met friend Beast Boy?"

Kara overheard the other extraterrestrial and smiled slightly. "No, she tried to kill off everything with a Y chromosome a few years ago. Sort of takes feminism to a whole new level, doesn't it?"

"How terrible!" the Tamaranian princess cried as the troop of guards escorted Aresia to an audience with Hippolyta.

"So, what do you say, Your Majesty?" the rogue Amazon demanded.

"You were forbidden from ever stepping foot upon Themyscira again, on pain of death," the matriarch stated firmly. "It was foolish of you to return here alone."

"But she's not alone," Ares contradicted as he swaggered into view, the blonde captive taking the opportunity to escape to the new arrivals' side.

"Ares," the queen greeted coldly.

"It's nice to see you as well, daughter," the blonde man replied, not shaken in the slightest. "And I brought a friend," the Greek god of war informed gleefully. "I believe that you two have already met."

A second male figure stepped out from behind Ares. "Hello, Hippolyta."

"Hades," the blonde ruler and her eldest daughter spat in unison.

"You look well, my dear," the other deity greeted smugly. Looking at the hostile Wonder Woman, he added, "And you are looking exceptionally lovely, my child."

"I am not your child," Diana asserted. "What are you doing here? In fact, how did you even get free? I destroyed the key years ago!"

"Oh, your grandfather here borrowed Pandora's old plaything," he confessed while pointing to the earthen jar in Ares' grip. "I believe the mortals refer to it as Pandora's Box these days. Quite a powerful little item, don't you agree?"

"I thought you planned on remaining in your realm after our last conversation," the Amazonian champion prompted.

"Yes, well... Tartarus becomes tediously dull after a while, and when Ares dropped by with troubling news regarding my baby brother on Mt. Olympus... how could I refuse?"

The other armored man smirked. "And I suppose that Persephone's little 'autumn cleaning' had nothing to do with it?"

"Why does that blasted woman want to put up curtains in my palace?" Hades exploded. "We live in the under-world! There's no sun to shine down there!"

Ares nodded sympathetically. "They're a strange breed. You wouldn't believe what Athena and Artemis have been up to recently..."

While the two gods were commiserating, Diana discretely addressed the Leaguers nearest her. "If this escalates, do not attack them directly. Hades is a clever opponent, and Ares only grows stronger off strife and discord."

"The League comms are down," Shayera advised. "Blondie over there must be blocking them somehow. Not that we could bring any male reinforcements here without ticking off Mommy dearest again anyway."

"The law only forbids mortal men from Themyscira," the eldest Amazonian princess corrected. "Male gods are still allowed."

The metaphorical penny dropped. "Shoot!" Kara cursed at her offline earpiece. "I really need to get one of those cigarette lighter things from Joe. Did you bring one, Raven?"

"No, I didn't," her quasi stepdaughter confessed, "and I doubt we have the time for me to search out Father's mind."

"Do the best you can," Diana decided. "With both Hades and Ares against us, I fear we may need Mr. Black's help. In the meanwhile, I need a few of you to get some things from the Javelin and take them to the kitchen staff..."

While the Leaguers took the brief reprieve to strategize, Aresia approached the two deities. "May we attack them now?" the blonde female demanded. "I want to claim the crown that you promised me."

Hades looked at the woman and chuckled darkly. "This girl child seems nearly as bloodthirsty as you, nephew," the underworld deity noted.

The god of war nodded in agreement. "But she forgets her place," he added with a glare in the former Amazon's direction, "not to mention that I only promised to get her here." Addressing the woman directly, he said, "Winning your trophy is up to you."

"Hera and the other goddesses will not stand for this, Ares," Hippolyta proclaimed. "They'll notice that Tartarus was once again breached and will no doubt be here soon to stop you."

The god of war's satisfied smile grew larger as he hefted the decorated urn. "Guess again! I used this little gem to make sure that our jailbreak goes unnoticed back home, though I suppose that something will have to be done to stop you from running off to tattle before we're ready..."

Hades made a summoning gesture whose meaning was soon understood as an army of undead soldiers rose from the ground and joined the phalanxes of demons escaping from Tartarus.

"It's nothing personal, Hippolyta," the god of the underworld called out idly, "but you did betray me the last time I was freed, and it is rather important that I get back to Olympus."

"You're mad!" the queen stated spitefully. "You'll never get away with this! Sisters, to battle!"

"And just when we were having such a lovely conversation," Hades faux-complained in a suffering tone. "Ah, well."

A nod of his brunette head sent the assembled dark forces into a full-out charge against the advancing Amazons.

Harry awoke with a sudden abrupt pain in his scar. Quickly regaining his senses, the wizard closed his eyes again and groaned.

"Not a-bloody-gain! The last time, it was a ruddy night club full of dark creatures! Can't the bloody universe hold itself together for five minutes?"

Another spike inflamed his nervous system. "Fine!" Harry shouted to his empty room as he pulled on his boots. "I'm going, I'm going!"

"This is completely nuts!" Black Canary complained as she and Vixen rushed several casks from the Amazon's kitchen staff back to the battlefield. "You know that right?"

Mari shrugged. "We're on a magically hidden island paradise, full of immortal man-hating women, and are under attack by two mythological beings and an army of animated corpses and actual demons. I'm willing to take a few things on faith."

"But this?" Dinah demanded incredulously. "There's a fight going on upstairs, and we're catering imported coffee?"

"Magic's funny that way," the African heroine noted as they approached the active battlefield. "Almost as strange as most magicians I've met. Hey, Diana!" the beast-powered woman shouted, waving at the in-flight Amazon to get her attention.

The female known the world over as Wonder Woman landed next to them. "Good job," the Amazonian champion congratulated as she shouldered two of the large containers. "Now we'll see if Batman is as clever as he believes."

Diana swiftly flew over one of the largest cluster of advancing demons and opened the casks, splattering the dark brown liquid on the aggressors. Just as the Dark Knight predicted, the coffee affected the demonic horde much like concentrated acid, causing the wicked foot soldiers to halt in pain. The few devils with the greatest exposure seemed to actually dissolve before their eyes.

Seeing their colleague's success, the other League personnel began assaulting the other nefarious threats with the beverage.

Meanwhile, the two males present stood a distance away from the skirmish, nonchalantly talking amongst themselves after having sent Aresia off to fight her ultimate nemesis, Hippolyta.

"You know," Hades noted, "Diana is a rather gifted warrior, as are her comrades. Don't you agree, Ares?"

The blonde man nodded. "I'll give you that," he admitted, "but their planet wide patrols have caused the rest of the world to grow lazy and weak. Look at all the invasions of Earth these past few years! You get a small, ragtag band of invaders—never more than a few hundred—and the entire planet turns belly up. It's disgusting! My Spartans could have decimated any of those threats single-handedly, and that was over two thousand years ago! The armies of today are pathetic, weak little worms who moan about peace and mercy!"

The dark-haired god of the Underworld shrugged. "Personally, I'm more concerned with your reports of Zeus proposing the League from behind the scenes. He's already sent Diana and her friend to Tartarus once; if he once again starts meddling in deathly affairs beyond his comprehension..."

"That's why I broke you out," Ares confirmed. "Maybe you can force Father to change his decision. If not, well... not all of the Titans are dead."

The senior god nodded in agreement. "True. Shall we go?"

As if he was responding to the invitation, Harry Apparated into the vacant area directly in front of the two deities. Looking around briefly, he finally addressed the pair. "I take it that you two are somehow responsible for all this?" he hazarded a guess.

"You could say that," Hades agreed. "Why do you ask?"

"Just making sure that I have the right lowlifes," the new arrival announced. "Reducto. Rpom." As the pair surprisingly regained their feet, Harry smiled grimly and drew his swords. "This ought to be good! Now then, let's discuss this need of yours to attack my girlfriend and daughter with an evil undead army of freaks..."

"How many demons does this guy have?" Kara demanded as her group coffee'd another demon platoon. As soon as the opposing force was thinned, she and Galatea flew in and began smashing the animated skeletons with whatever was at hand.

"Just right off the top of my head?" her somewhat-identical twin asked. "A lot." Another squad of reinforcements crawled out of the ground and moved to engage them. "And here comes a few dozen more."

Her eyes narrowed at the advancing menaces, Raven growled, "Stop it already!"

Much to her surprise, the walking skeletons did precisely that. Their sudden halt had a similar effect on the interspersed demons, who were both baffled and worried that the smallest member of the opposition could command their allies so easily.

The teenaged witch smiled as the explanation behind this fortuitous turn of events registered. "Thank you, Father," she announced with a decidedly wolfish grin.

"Father?" one of the brighter demons demanded in the unannounced ceasefire.

Raven nodded. "Mr. Black" she responded simply.

The reaction was instantaneous.

"The Spawn of Black!" several demons yelled as they ran back towards the rear of the army, bowling over their colleagues in the process. "Run away!"

The purple-haired girl smirked. "I could get used to this," she confessed.

"Hey, the cavalry's arrived," Shayera noted as she pointed towards the other end of the battlefield. The three battling magicians were all sporting superficial injuries as they exchanged melee weapon hits and devastating magical blasts.

Kara looked over at the other fight, smiling as Harry Banished Ares into a support column and opened a gash on Hades' leg with his fire-covered sword. The Argosian then winced as the god of the underworld momentarily blinded her boyfriend with a series of fireballs as the other man advanced whilst brandishing his own sword.

"We've got to help him!" the young blonde woman exclaimed.

"Kara, wait!" Shayera called. "Don't just go—"

The blue-clad Supergirl made a beeline towards the magical battle.

"—charging off," the Thanagarian detective finished belatedly before taking in the relentless undead attacking their allies. "Well, isn't this just peachy?" she demanded before once more enthusiastically braining demons with her mace.

Harry silently growled in frustration. He was running through his normal repertoire of spells and tactics, but the two beings facing off against him seemed to share his unusual recovery time. In the amount of time it took him to dispatch one of the pair, the other had already recuperated and was preparing to resume a second simultaneous fight.

'This isn't good!' Harry thought feverously. 'I could really use a new plan right about now!'

The fact that his two adversaries were showing signs of strain as well came as small consolation; their alternating attacks were not occurring as frequently, or with as much intensity, as before.

"Incoming," the black-haired deity informed his blonde colleague. Both Harry and the fair-haired warrior glanced in the indicated direction, only to find Kara heading right for them with Galatea, Shayera, and Raven following closely behind.

"I've got them," Ares replied before aiming the earthen container in his grasp. A bright white light flew towards the approaching Leaguers.

Harry's eyes bulged in what would have been considered a comic fashion in any other circumstance, and he instinctively analyzed the situation. Chief among his observations was the realization that the magical blast was heading towards some of the most important people in his life. With the energy's intensity, the wizard doubted that a shield would be sufficient to redirect the blast. Banishing the small group out of the way would not solve the true problem, as the presumably lethal spell would continue on its path and strike several more of his unsuspecting friends. His mind desperately latching onto a plan with a small chance of success, Harry jumped into motion.

His sword once more becoming a scythe, Harry Apparated in front of the League's representatives and set his feet for the impending collision.

'I'm going to feel this one in the morning—I hope,' the wizard thought resignedly as the ominous weapon began absorbing the mysterious spell. To his immense surprise, his inane tactic actually seemed to be working; the broad magical beam was diverted straight to his position, not unlike lightning to a grounding rod.

Harry suddenly decided that the metaphor may have been ill chosen, as his scythe grew warm and began glowing as brightly as the magical vase in the suddenly dumbstruck blonde's hand. The warm sensation grew frighteningly more intense, and a tingling feeling began creeping up his arms from where he clenched the weapon's shaft.

'Bugger!' Harry mentally swore as the feedback suddenly reached critical mass and detonated. The magical blast temporarily blinded the wizard as his form was sent flying across the battlefield, ultimately embedding itself deeply in the inconveniently placed hillside. Adding insult to injury, the collision dislodged some of the ground cover overhead, concealing the newly hewn cave beneath the miniature avalanche. The explosion also served to halt the other skirmishes, as combatants on both sides took in the sudden landscaping.

"What a pity," Ares commented to his uncle, easily overheard by all nearby in the sudden stillness. "He was truly a skilled warrior."

Hades nodded. "For a moment, I was beginning to wonder whether he might actually defeat us."

The blonde man looked at his now powerless urn. "Well, this thing's completely drained, so I guess he lost," Ares said pointedly as he carelessly discarded the used vessel. "Nobody could have survived that."

"Ow!" Harry muttered as he regained his senses. "What the frack hit me?" As his vision cleared, he found himself buried in a shallow pit with only his scythe for illumination.

"Wait a second," he vocalized confusedly. "Since when does my scythe glow? It looks almost like... that... jar," Harry suddenly realized. The repercussions of his latest mishap with the magical super weapon dawned, leaving him smiling in a very unfriendly way.

"Right then," the wizard nodded to himself, "time for Round Two."

Turning his attention back to the stalled battle, Ares glanced at his uncle and asked, "Well... I'm getting bored. Shall we finish it?" His attention—and that of everyone else nearby—was immediately drawn to the sudden explosion.

"You know," Harry began idly as he marched out of his would-be tomb and reduced a few of the more bothersome foot soldiers to soggy bits, "I didn't ask for any of this."

Another rapid burst of spell fire was dispersed into the infantry, to even further devastating effect.

"All I wanted was a little vacation; you know, just some time to have a semblance of a normal life."

Three more battalions of demons were shredded by invisible and intangible means.

"A little time alone... see a show, get drunk and maybe rearrange the countryside or update my collection of road signs... stuff like that. But no!"

The wizard began gesturing irritably, to the accompaniment of further destruction.

"Not only do I get rampaging mutant sea turtles, power-mad dictators, magically inclined vampires, whiny future superheroes and—let's not forget—the bloody weekly demon invasions," Harry complained, "but then I had to hop around the ruddy multiverse putting out fires. Then, when I finally get a few moments rest, you go and breach a hell dimension to raise an undead army!"

Given his current temperament, Harry's form rapidly dissolved into a ranting skeleton, the magically-upgraded scythe glowing in accompaniment to his vitriol. The dread weapon flared briefly, and the front ranks of the undead horde were instantly reduced to a conflagration.

"It's gotten to the point that I can't even get a good night's sleep anymore, and I've! Had! Enough!" Harry shouted, while pointing one skeletal finger at the two suddenly wary gods. "If I have to plant every last one of you dark wankers six feet under to get some shut eye around here, then I will!"

By this point, the remains of the once-menacing army decided that a strategic withdrawal was in order and promptly fled. Harry spotted this movement and, without considering his actions all that heavily, swung his radiant weapon in a manner reminiscent of a golfer readying for a long drive. A professional athlete he was not, but the aggravated and sleep-deprived incarnation of death did succeed in hurling the two remaining threats in the same general direction as their former army. The involuntarily-flying individuals soon overtook their forces on the ground, soaring straight through the fiery portal as if hit by a large invisible club.

Not content with the retreating dark creatures' pace, Harry chased the stragglers through the gateway. Aside from the various assorted skeletons and demons, he spotted one apparently human enemy facing off against who he believed to be Diana's mother, Hippolyta. In the event that she had something to do with the breached portal, he restrained his homicidal instincts and stunned the woman. An additional couple of brief charms had the blonde woman bound in rope and levitated several feet off the ground.

Continuing on past the portal's threshold, the wizard cast a Locking Charm on the doors to prevent any stragglers from escaping back onto the occupied island. Turning around, the wizard searched for his two primary opponents, but saw nothing more than the rapidly shrinking backs of the assorted dark creatures.

"You're not getting off that easily!" Harry called out angrily as he progressed further into the fiery domain. "Show yourselves, cowards!" He immediately ducked the twin bars of flame that passed just over his head. "Ah," the mage noted to himself as he returned fire, "there you are."

Reasoning that if one Banishing Charm was good then two must be better, Harry caught his raven-haired opponent with an encore hex and sent the man flying into an oddly glowing river.

"Oh, no, you don't!" he called, before sending bolts of lightning into the water where the armored figure submerged. Smirking slightly, Harry glanced around the inhospitable region. "Now, where did the other one go...?" he wondered aloud.

The wizard's question was soon answered as the whistling noise of an oncoming broadsword from behind brought his own blade sweeping around to block the craven attack. "Now, that's just plain rude," Harry commented as the pair exchanged several parries.

"Don't you ever die?" the blonde man roared disbelievingly.

"Odd. I was thinking exactly the same thing about you."

Apparently, the flaxen swordsman had a short temper, as he discarded his sword and made as if to cast a spell. Harry instinctively did the same, and the colliding blasts of energy were sufficient to send both combatants flying.

In continuation of the established theme, the blonde-haired deity found himself flung into the luminescent river near his uncle, while Harry's temporarily stunned frame landed in another adjacent body of water.

"What is going on here?" a stern female voice demanded, interrupting a huddle around the Tartarus gate.

"Lady Athena, Lady Artemis," Hippolyta greeted as the Amazons present knelt. "You honor us with your presences."

"Rise, my daughters," the goddess of wisdom instructed as her red-haired companion waited impatiently for an answer to her question. "What has happened?"

"It was your brother Ares, my Lady," the Amazonian queen informed. "He stole onto Themyscira and breached the gates of Tartarus, releasing Hades and his armies upon us."

Athena frowned. "No single god should have been able to penetrate Hephaestus's protections. How was this done?"

Hippolyta motioned for one of the Amazons bearing the discarded urn to approach. "He used this, my Lady."

"Pandora's Urn?" the Greek goddess of wisdom breathed.

"Urn'?" Raven questioned. "I thought it was supposed to be a box."

"A corruption of the original tale," Athena waved off the matter as the two new arrivals examined the container.

Artemis squinted at the item. "It looks like the airhead emptied it, too."

"Ares is no fool," the other deity answered. "He knows the consequences to humanity if such a thing ever happened."

In reply, the goddess of the hunt removed the container's lid—to no obvious effect.

"What would have possessed him to do such a thing?" Athena wondered aloud disbelievingly.

Having been closest to the scene, Kara relayed the sequence of events to the two new arrivals. Once finished, she asked, "What's the big deal, anyway? If I remember the story right, wasn't Hope all that remained locked inside that thing?"

Athena smiled slightly. "Not Hope, my child," she gently disagreed. "The mortal world has known Hope for ages, all because the

greatest of all misfortunes has remained incarcerated. In actuality, what remained locked inside the urn was Anticipation of Misfortune, Hope's antithesis."

Seeing that her half-sister's explanation left too much unexplained, Artemis intervened. "Consider the bleakest day imaginable, then add the knowledge that it could only ever worsen no matter what you did. That's the crisis that Mr. Black averted, though I'm surprised that his tactic actually worked. There's not that many people out there who would even try to absorb a Primal Force, for fear of being destroyed if nothing else."

"That idiot!" Kara grumbled. "I'm going to break him of this habit if it's the last thing I do."

"Good luck," Athena offered resignedly. "Despite everything else, he's still ultimately just a man, and men come in two main types: overbearing and overprotective."

"And then there's people like Joe, who somehow manage to do both simultaneously," Kara agreed.

Artemis grinned. "Well, he is Mr. Black, after all. Speaking of which, Athena, don't you think we should check on them? They've been gone a while now."

"May as well," the other goddess agreed before the pair disappeared, leaving Kara growling at being left behind again.

"So," Hippolyta said conversationally once the Amazons and Leaguers were alone, "Erebus once more walks the Earth. Perhaps he will remain here a while; it has been a long time since his last visit, and I rather missed him."

"I know I'm going to regret this," Shayera avowed, "but who... or what, is Erebus?"

"And why didn't you ever mention knowing Mr. Black before?" Diana added.

"To answer your question, Shayera, Erebus—or, as you might recognize it, Erebus—is the primeval Darkness. His name literally translates into—"

"Let me guess," Kara interrupted. "Some sort of play on the word 'Black'?"

The Amazonian monarch paused momentarily. "Well, yes. The literal translation is 'Deep blackness or shadow'. He is the son of the primordial god Chaos, and is the brother of Lady Nyx."

"And for the hat trick," the Thanagarian continued, "does... Erebus have anything to do with death or the underworld?"

Diana answered for her mother. "While some confuse him with Hades himself, Erebus is actually where the dead must pass immediately after dying. He is a... distribution center, of sorts, for deceased souls. It is not until a soul leaves Erebus that it encounters Charon's ferry and enters the afterlife proper. What I want to know, Mother," the Amazon princess exclaimed, "is how you know him as well as you say."

"Yes, Sister, do enlighten the young ones," the Queen's dark-skinned Captain of the Guard instructed. "I would love to hear the story again myself."

Hippolyta rolled her eyes. "Hush, Phillippa," the blonde monarch gently admonished. "It's not that riveting a tale."

Upon receiving the inquiring looks from the two princesses, the military officer decided to share the tale herself. "It was millennia ago, before we Amazons ever received Themyscira. Your mother was no more than eight summers' old when she decided that we would explore the wilderness near our settlement. Well, things progressed and we soon found ourselves lost and without supplies by the time that Apollo had crossed the sky. Seeking shelter for the night, we stumbled upon what we thought was an empty cave. However, the cave already had an occupant—one giant, sleeping, midnight-colored wolf."

The blonde queen closed her eyes and emitted a slight groan, causing the narrator to smile wider. "Briefly put, your mother attempted to defeat the wolf by bashing its head in with a sharpened rock she had found. Unfortunately, she succeeded only in rousing the great beast and aggravating it. The wolf gave chase, and we ended up taking a midnight swim after running off the trail and

landing in a small lake. When we surfaced, we found the animal calmly sitting on the shoreline with its tongue lolled out of its mouth. After Hippolyta exhausted her rather... colorful vocabulary at the wolf's honor and pedigree, it twisted itself into a man and we suddenly found ourselves standing dry in front of him."

At this point, the Amazons' leader had turned a rather fetching shade of red.

"Anyway," Phillippa continued relentlessly, "the man began chastising us both for wondering off into the woods unsupervised, before escorting us back to the cave. I remember that it was a chilly night, which he didn't seem to notice until we mentioned it. He set up camp, fixed us dinner and—as we found out the next morning—kept watch the entire night as we slept. The next morning, he produced a horse from somewhere, and we rode it while he led us back the way we had traveled. It was during the journey that we learned his name, though it wasn't until we had arrived home that we learned who he truly was. In any event, we ran into a search party around midday and, once he was assured that we were well, he disappeared. We haven't seen or heard of him since... until today. A fact which disquieted your mother for many a year, if you know what I mean."

"Mother!" Diana blurted, shocked at what she had just learned.

Hippolyta shrugged. "You must admit that he is a handsome god and not without a certain charm. True, he's rather grouchy when woken prematurely, but I suppose that even gods are allowed their foibles. So," the queen changed the subject, "he calls himself 'Mr. Black' now, does he?"

Surfacing from the river where he had landed, the hydrated Death dried himself. 'Odd,' a detached part of Harry's mind noted, 'this river looks awfully different to the other one. Definitely magical, though. If I grow another arm or something, I am so kicking their arses again!'

Putting his concerns regarding the fluid's nature out of his mind, the mage searched for his opponents. He found the blonde swordsman in short order, lackadaisically swimming around the unconsciously floating brunette.

"An awful lot of water around here to be a hell dimension," Harry noted aloud. The blonde warrior seemed to forget all about their fight,

a fact which his opponent utilized. A second electrocution later, Harry levitated two unconscious bodies out of the water. Dropping the defeated men at his feet, the wizard pondered his next move.

"I suppose the honorable thing would be to take them captive at this point," Harry mused aloud as he stared at his sleeping captives, "especially since the usual stuff isn't working."

Considering the situation for a few moments, he finally smiled. "Nah!"

The two goddesses materialized inside Tartarus some time later, near where they sensed their missing relations. "I don't believe it," Artemis admitted.

Athena smiled as Harry rode past on Mortis, all the while dragging two yelling gods behind him as the giant three-headed hellhound Cerberus gave chase. Combined with the cheering demon spectators, the impromptu rodeo was quite a spectacle. "I believe that I win our little wager, dear Artemis."

Grumbling to herself, the redhead dug through a pocket before handing Athena several gold coins. "I still can't believe that you bet against your own brother and uncle," she complained.

"Never underestimate the power of sheer stubbornness and dumb luck," she advised. "Now, do you suppose that their reputations have suffered enough, yet?"

"Oh, I'd say irreparably so," Artemis professed. "Not even Hades can be intimidating when someone gives him a black eye and a split lip, shaves him bald, dresses him in a pink ballerina's outfit, and then drags him all over his own realm while using him as a chew toy for his own dog."

"I thought so, too," the goddess of wisdom seconded. As the caravan passed near their location, she stepped forward and hailed its conductor.

"Hey, Thena, Artie," Harry greeted as he stunned his two passengers again. "Didn't expect to see you here. What's up?"

"We might ask you the same question, Joe. Are you three having fun?"

"Tremendously. What can I do for you?"

"Well, from what we've gathered, those two were planning an invasion, just not of Earth. Apparently, they planned to... discuss something with our father."

Harry nodded. "Ah! I see. Well, don't worry about it. I'm still experimenting, but I'm sure to find something that'll finally kill them sooner or later."

The blonde woman shook her head. "That's the thing. Whatever prompted them to try something this desperate may be important."

"I guess we'll never know," the wizard replied as he ran a thumb lightly over his axe's sharp edge.

"What she's trying to say," Artemis inserted, "is that you can't kill them."

Harry grinned slightly. "Actually, I believe that you'll find that I can." He looked back down at the oblivious pair. "True, I haven't quite managed it yet, but it's only a matter of time."

"Would it change your methods any if I said that he's my brother?" Athena asked.

He thought for a moment. "I'd probably make a point of consoling you later," he offered.

Undaunted, the fair-haired female continued, "Is killing the pair of idiots that important to you? I mean, you have humiliated them beyond all measure."

Harry looked at the women disbelievingly. "They broke open a hell dimension, launched an invasion on the Amazon nation, and attacked both my girlfriend and daughter with an undead army—while I'm supervising all things Death in this universe." He snorted. "Yes, I'd say that their termination's a given at this point."

At her half-sister's helpless look, Artemis sighed before asking, "You do know that, if you kill them, you've got to take their jobs over, right?"

The mage blinked. "Come again. What jobs?"

"The blonde one there is our brother Ares, the god of violent warfare and slaughter. The black-haired one's our uncle Hades, the Lord of the Grecian Underworlds—including this dump," the redheaded archer explained. "If they die, whoever's responsible gets stuck with their responsibilities."

"Bugger!" Harry swore before putting away the axe. "Well, since killing them is out of the question, I guess I need to imprison them somehow."

In answer to his invitation, the Crystal Skull he had retrieved from its hiding place on the Dark Continent appeared in the wizard's hand and gave off a tremendously bright light. As the group watched, ghostly forms rose from the two corporeal bodies, each identical in general appearance to its body of origin. In an instant, the Skull's light latched onto the two spirits and, a moment later, the glare disappeared—along with the souls of the two gods in question.

"Huh," Harry huffed wonderingly, "that was convenient. Well, I guess that answers which Skull I grabbed." Bouncing the artifact in one hand, he added, "Thanks for the heads up, Artie."

Athena seemed beside herself. "Y-you... have a Soul Trap?" she asked bewilderedly.

"Apparently so," Harry replied in distanced bemusement as he non-too-gently nudged one of the now-soulless corpses with his foot. "I can think of a few times where this little gadget would have come in handy. So... if your brother's a god of war and your uncle's a god of death, that would make you two..."

"Artemis the Huntress and Pallas Athena," the blonde woman supplied, "goddesses of Olympus."

Harry nodded as if finally putting a puzzle together. "Figures," he muttered. "Right, well, I guess the first question would be... why the subterfuge?"

"Do you go around telling everyone exactly who you are?" Athena questioned.

Harry conceded the matter. "Point."

"It's nice to have a break from all the bowing and scraping on occasion," Artemis replied. "By the way, how'd you manage to get the upper hand on those two, anyway?"

The wizard shrugged. "Dumb luck, honestly. I knocked the pair of them into a magical river over there." He pointed off in an eastern direction. "From what I've noticed whenever they've woken up since then, it seems that they've both got total amnesia."

The archer began to chuckle. "You knocked them both into the Lethe... just like that?"

"Well, to be perfectly honest, Blondie there managed to Banish me into another river." He made a show of looking himself over. "I seem to be alright, though, except for this killer headache. I've been remembering hexes and curses a whole lot easier as well. Heck, I've been remembering all sorts of things since my unscheduled bath."

The two women briefly looked away from him. "Imagine that," Athena finally offered.

"Tell me about it," he agreed. "You'd almost think that I landed in a 'River of Memory' or some such."

"Close enough," Athena acknowledged. "We call it the Mnemosyne."

"You're... not joking, are you?" he asked dejectedly. They both shook their heads. "Any way to reverse it?"

"There's always the Lethe," Artemis offered cheerfully.

Harry snorted. "I'll pass. So, Thena... Why exactly do you not want me to kill them?"

"Well," she hesitated, "they're not really... bad people. My brother's main problem is that he just likes to fight. The reason that he's being unbearable at the moment is because he's worried about the future."

Specifically, I think he's afraid of humanity growing too complacent and relying on groups like the Justice League to solve all their problems instead of fending for themselves."

Harry considered her reply. "I can agree with that. In fact, I've often said much the same... but he's going about it all wrong."

The woman shrugged. "I agree. He's always been rather... impetuous."

Her female companion chortled. "Tell me about it!"

"So..." Harry mentally switched gears. "What about the other one? Is he misunderstood as well?"

"Our uncle... well, he and our father Zeus haven't seen eye-to-eye in a very long time. Dad kept interfering in Hades' business, tipping the balance between life and death, and our uncle ended up starting a war just to restore things to where they should be. He ultimately succeeded but was banished down here in retaliation. That's why Hades raised this army; our father Zeus has been up to his old tricks again, and he wanted to head off any further damage. I'm afraid that the Amazons sort of forced the issue."

The wizard blinked. "You're telling me," he asked lowly, "that I've spent the better part of an hour fighting two gods... for ultimately doing the right thing?"

The two women glanced at one another. "Essentially," Athena replied as she braced herself for the impending explosion.

"Bwahahahahahahahahaha."

The ladies took a long step back while the wizard regained his composure.

"That's right, folks!" Harry announced jovially. "The Universe's spittoon, live and in person! So... hasn't anyone in your messed up family ever heard of arbitration?"

"Well... our mother tried to mediate their dispute once, but neither of them took her seriously," Athena admitted. "I mean, whoever we got

to arbitrate the matter would have to be knowledgeable of the balance between Life and Death—"

"—strong enough if necessary to force them both to listen—" Artemis added.

"—and be far enough removed from the conflict to judge it objectively," the other woman finished, before the pair looked at Harry intently.

The hair rising on the back of his neck motivated Harry to immediately move towards his waiting Pooka. "Right, well, it's been great to see you, but I've really got to be going. Places to go, bad guys to kill, you know how it is."

"Please?" the two chorused.

Harry crossed his arms resolutely.

Four eyes began to tear up on command.

He frowned.

Lips began to quiver pitifully.

"Aw, bloody hell!"

Dragging the two soulless bodies behind him, Harry and the two women left the fiery dimension for the more hospitable Themyscira, appearing behind the gathered group just in time to overhear Hippolyta's question his contemporary name.

'So... he calls himself 'Mr. Black' now, does he?'

"The one and only," he announced, causing the gathered women to spin around rapidly.

The wizard soon found himself the center of attention of several scores of women, and not necessarily in the good way.

"Umm... yes?" he offered the inquisitive mob.

While the group in general did nothing but stare, a certain petite blonde woman forced her way to the forefront and made a show of inspecting Harry for damage. Finding nothing serious, the Argosian then proceeded to smack him upside the head.

"What did you think you were doing?" the irritated Supergirl demanded.

"Wasn't it obvious?" Harry complained as he rubbed the offended area. "Stopping madmen, fighting an undead army, postponing the end of the world... the usual."

"I'm talking about your little disappearing act!" she prompted while rapping on the locked and warded dimensional portal.

"What better place than a hell dimension to have a brawl?" Harry asked as innocently as he could manage. "For one thing, nobody cares about errant property damage."

"Where did you come from?" Hippolyta demanded nervously.

Harry smiled at the blonde monarch. "Nobody's covered this with you still?" he demanded playfully "Alrighty, then. You see, when a man and a woman like each other very, very much..."

His current verbal sparring partner covered her eyes tiredly and groaned, eliciting a bark of laughter from the sole conscious male present.

Said laughter was immediately cut off when a certain blonde Argosian elbowed his side harshly. "You ran off without backup again."

"I did not!" Harry loudly protested. Lowering his volume, he added, "I had Mortis."

"And don't forget the giant three-headed hellhound Cerberus," Artemis added mischievously. "He was an integral part of Operation: Chew Toy." After garnering several confused glances, she elaborated. "We caught our dear Mr. Black exercising Tartarus's guard dog by dragging those two soulless bodies behind his horse as bait."

"That is not true," the wizard contradicted. In an injured tone, Harry said, "The two were still conscious when I dragged them behind my horse as bait. I didn't rip out their souls until later."

"I stand corrected," the redhead admitted.

"You removed their souls?" Diana questioned as the group finally realized the grim nature of his cargo.

Noticing the worried glances he was receiving, Harry replied reassuringly, "I'm going to give them back... eventually. Which reminds me," he said before addressing Kara and Raven. "Turns out this whole thing was a rather large misunderstanding, and I've got to go officiate a debate to help straighten out this mess. I may be gone a while, so don't wait up."

"Do you have to go?" Kara complained. "Isn't there someone else?"

"Sorry, Kara. I'm the only Death on-call for this particular universe at the moment. Blame these two; they're the ones that twisted my arm."

For some strange reason, the women in question seemed to take his thinly veiled barb as a compliment, causing him to mutter as he approached the still-restrained blonde ex-Amazon.

"So, you're Aresia," he addressed the unconscious woman. "Huh," he muttered as he studied the immobilized blonde, "you're the one who tried to off half the planet a couple years back? Odd... I thought you'd be taller."

Recalling the League's reports on the woman's back story, he switched to Mage Sight and took in the mystically enhanced female. "Very nice spell work," he congratulated, "much nicer than the Slayer essence." A few moments' further study revealed more detailed information on the process. "Ah, I see how it's done now. Very clever. Very clever, indeed."

"Thank you," Athena accepted graciously, causing Harry to smile at her briefly.

A quick spell from one of his rituals texts later, Harry released Aresia from his restraining spell. "There you ladies go," he mentioned to the

waiting guards. "She should be easier to manage. Now, let's see what she knows." Another charm roused the woman.

"What did you do to me?" the prisoner demanded near-hysterically as she found herself much more effectively constrained than only two of her former sisters should have managed.

"Oh, I removed those enhancements you were given," the wizard supplied offhandedly. "You've been a very bad girl, after all—and while we're on the topic, what did you know of the plans here today?"

Her reply was mostly unintelligible, and definitely uncomplimentary.

"Now, that was very unladylike," Harry informed when the blonde captive ran out of insults.

His efforts earned another round of vitriol.

"Perhaps I should have questioned her first and then broke the enchantments," he pondered aloud.

"That would have probably been wiser," Athena agreed. "Even if she knew of our brother's plan, this poor and confused child would have been unable to stop him."

The wizard stared hard at the woman. "Let me guess; you want me to spare her, too. Right?"

"Correct."

Harry groaned. "I hope you realize that all these little acts of mercy are going to destroy my reputation."

The goddess made a show of observing their environment, most notably the scorched stone and gory remains of the short-lived invasion force. "Somehow," she conjectured wryly, "I believe that your standing as the universe's penultimate bringer of doom will endure."

He sighed. "Right then. Oh, one more thing." Harry turned to the blonde queen. "I've been thinking—" he announced.

"Uh, oh," Kara interrupted cheerfully.

"Quiet, you," he ordered in like manner. "It's just an idea, but if you really want to improve relations with the rest of the world, you might think about opening an embassy overseas somewhere."

"An... embassy?" Hippolyta echoed questioningly.

Harry nodded. "Yes. You get a small amount of sovereign land in another nation, where you set up offices and maintain diplomatic ties with that nation."

"And what would we have to give in return?"

"Well... eventually, someone would probably want to set up something similar here. At least, I think that's how the system works. In all honesty, I pay little attention to politics when it doesn't directly concern me."

The monarch looked contemplative. "This will require much prayer and reflection," she replied.

"It's just a thought," he professed. Before he could continue, a loud racket began emitting from the direction of the Tartarus Gate. Moments later, everyone present heard a crashing sound, which was soon joined by excited barking.

"Someone's about to have company!" Artemis sang teasingly.

Harry just sighed as the giant three-headed guard dog Cerberus tore into the miniature coliseum bearing a gnawed tree in two of its mouths.

"Cerberus," the wizard greeted tiredly as the dog affectionately pounced on him, "I can't play now. I have work to do."

The immortal canine whined piteously.

"Yes, I know that's not as much fun as playing fetch, but I have to do it anyway."

He was greeted with a few yelps interspersed amidst the high-pitched whines.

"I enjoyed our games, too, but now I really have to go."

Harry was placed on the receiving end of three puppy stares—which looked particularly odd when generated by a singular entity.

"One last throw," Harry compromised, "then you go back to your post. Okay?"

Cerberus barked his consent.

"Alright, give me the stick." When the dog obeyed, he flung it end-over-end out towards the empty tournament field. With three howls of excitement, the large beast took off after its prize.

"You know," Athena mused, "it's more than a little disturbing that you can carry on a conversation with him."

Harry shrugged. "It's a canine thing. If you think that's strange, you should meet my godfather—his form was a grim, and he talked to cats!" He smiled as he watched the dog's antics. "I really love that breed!"

Once the giant puppy returned with its prize, Harry patted its three heads before sending it back to Tartarus and locking the portal more thoroughly. He then returned to the clustered ladies and announced that he had made additions to the warding scheme.

"Hopefully, you won't be disturbed by the Underworld for a while," he finished before returning his attention to his divine companions. "Shall we get this show on the road?"

"Certainly. Follow us," Athena instructed.

"Later, everybody," Harry called before following the females' Apparation to their home for the meeting.

A/N: Sorry for the long delay in publishing this chapter. Hopefully, the 15,600-word length makes up for it.

I've updated my storyboard, and it looks like I'll be concluding this project in two more chapters. Chapter Fifteen is largely complete, and I hope to post it in the very near future.

Several omakes and suggestions were implemented in this chapter. Among these were: Memorabilia by Luinlothana, Chris Hill, and Ausfinbar; For the Thrill of It by Luinlothana; and The Eyes Have It by Chris Hill.

Many thanks to James and Chris for proofreading this chapter, and to all the CaerAzkaban group members whose suggestions appear in this update.

Thank you for your interest, and please remember to review.

Previous Chapter
Terminal Justice

Chapter 14: The Day of Interruptions
by Overkill

Next Chapter

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Chapter 15: The Great Blackout by Overkill

Next Chapter

Disclaimer: This is a cross between JLA (Season 5) and Rorschach's Blot's Make A Wish Story. Harry Potter is owned by JK Rowling and various publishers. Henchgirl, The Professor, and other such objects are Rorschach's creation. DC Comics own the Justice League and associated characters/plot devices. The lack of plot, however, can be attributed to me.

The Great Blackout

"So... this is your folks' place, then?" Harry asked after the two women led him through an ornate gate and into an ethereal space filled with crystalline structures. "Very nice," he finally commented, "especially the mountaintop motif."

Artemis shrugged. "It works for us. You wouldn't believe how difficult it is to keep clean, though."

"I can imagine," he replied ruefully. "Our beach is always being littered with flotsam, jetsam... bloody pissed Australians and their ruddy ward-penetrating boats... Anyway, where to first?"

"My brother's place," the redheaded archer decided, "since you did such a number on those two. He's a Healer."

Harry smiled slightly. "What can I say? People trying to kill my friends always put me in a bad mood for some reason."

The party walked—or was dragged—to a resplendent house where the redhead's brother apparently lived. The ornate chariot parked in front of the residence not only peaked Harry's curiosity, but also informed the group that the Healer was present. Shortly thereafter, he met the acquaintance of her brother Apollo, who pledged that he could reverse his relations' condition. After the new addition to their party gathered his satchel, Harry followed the trio to their parents' house, where the couple was brought up to speed.

"And you say that the effects of the Lethe lingered that long after exposure?" the older man introduced as Zeus asked as he stared

hard at the two men. "Something must have catalyzed their condition. Perhaps something they ate, or were exposed to."

"Like a few bolts of lightning?" Artemis voiced helpfully.

Harry rubbed his neck as the gray-haired man affirmed her suggestion.

"How did this come to pass?" the gray-haired man demanded.

"I might've had something to do with it," Harry reluctantly admitted. "They did let an undead army out of..." he groped for the dimension's name, "Tartarus before trying to kill my girlfriend and daughter, not to mention several of my friends. I was... upset."

"So I gathered," the other man announced dryly. "Why lightning?"

The wizard shrugged. "Pure chance, I suppose. It seemed to bother them more than most of my other tricks, so I used it. I've always had good luck with that one." He demonstrated by creating a small ball of black lightning in one upturned hand, which snaked up his arm, crossed his shoulders, and dropped into his other cupped appendage. "I guess it's like the flying thing. I've just always been able to do it."

The old man blinked oddly. "And you can't explain your... proficiency?" the self-proclaimed Lord of the Sky and wielder of elemental lightning questioned.

"Not a clue," Harry confirmed. "Now, if it isn't too much trouble, can we contact everyone involved and get started? It's been a very long day."

No one objected to the suggestion, and one of Flash's cousins—named Hermes of all things—zipped out to gather a few more people.

One incident which helped to improve his mood occurred after he had returned the two souls to their proper location. While Apollo was attempting to reverse their induced amnesia and unconsciousness, a dark-haired woman in a purple dress approached the huddle.

"My, isn't this delightful!" she nearly purred. "And who do we have to thank for this lovely spectacle?"

"That would be me," Harry admitted. "Joe Black," he introduced himself.

"Eris," the woman replied. "It's a real pleasure to meet you." She studied the two indisposed gods for a few moments more. "You know, it's a real shame to waste such an opportunity as this."

"Oh?" the wizard inquired. "How so?"

The woman began whispering in his ear, and he was soon grinning as widely as she.

Within a few minutes, their messenger had returned with news that the party was gathered in the main conference room.

"Thank you, Hermes," Zeus replied. "We will be there directly. Apollo, when those two are revived, send them to us. I am eager to learn firsthand of their latest transgressions."

"What in the name of Olympus hit me?" Ares groaned.

"From what I've gathered, a great many things," his half-brother supplied. "Easy now," Apollo cautioned as the other blonde struggled to his feet, "you've had a rough time of it."

"What happened?" Hades asked groggily as he unsteadily made his way to his feet. "And why does it smell like wet dog in here?" He looked over at his nephews and started laughing.

"What?" the god of war demanded sharply.

"Y-you're bald! And purple! And wearing a little girl's dress!" He broke down in laughter again. "And those ears! You look like an ass!"

Ares reviewed his own appearance in increasing fury. "Looked in the mirror lately?" he sniped back at the older man.

The former brunette did so, and promptly bellowed expletives as a result.

"Who did this?" Hades demanded. "Eris? Hermes?"

"Actually," Apollo interrupted with as much solemnity as he could muster, "I believe that a certain Mr. Black is responsible."

"Who?" the Lord of the Underworld asked in confusion.

"Black?" the ranting Ares echoed. "I've heard that name..." Recognition finally dawned. "No doubt this is Athena's work!"

"According to both Athena and Artemis, he's the newest Death from another dimension," the healer replied. "I believe he's standing in for Teleute at the moment."

This latest tidbit was sufficient to derail Ares' ongoing tirade. "You mean... Hades decked his own boss? Bwahahahahaha."

"Please do remember, Nephew, who assaulted him with Pandora's Urn," the elder god interjected.

Suddenly somber, the other man replied, "Good point. Why'd he back off then, if he had us beat? Are they turning out Deaths that cowardly these days?"

Seizing the opportunity for all it was worth, Apollo smiled before stating, "Artemis convinced him that it wasn't worth the hassle of taking your lives."

"Alright," Harry announced sometime later, "we've heard from all three sides of the issue. To summarize, Hades' chief concern is that too many individuals from certain... groups have been granted excessive freedoms—multiple resurrections and whatnot—which have upset the balance between Life and Death. Zeus, however, maintains that such liberties are necessary, due to so few heroes existing in the world today. For similar reasons, Ares agrees that there aren't enough champions in this day and age. So... what do you think should be done?"

The ensuing silence was broken only by restless shifting.

Harry rested his head in one upturned palm. "I need a drink," he muttered. His ears were soon greeted by the sound of a full mug

being slid down the table. Glancing gratefully at its point of origin, the wizard added, "Thank you, Bacchus."

Draining a good portion of the odd beer, he stated, "We all agree that the root problem is the lack of champions to handle the big issues... right?" At gaining the tentative affirmations of the majority present, Harry continued, "So why not recruit more?"

"And how, precisely, do you intend to do that?" Ares demanded.

"And you've been waging war for how long?" Harry replied derisively. "That's the easiest part. My friends and I recruited a small force over the course of a summer back home. There would be several willing people among the populace, if they were only given some direction."

"You're talking about ordinary mortals," Zeus protested. "Even a large group wouldn't have the raw power to defend against the current magnitude of threats."

The wizard shrugged. "So equip them. The Green Lantern Corp recruits nothing but ordinary people—but give a few ordinary beings weapons granting limited magical powers, and you've suddenly got a force to be reckoned with. You can even go a step further and give them enchanted armor—like that autonomous suit that caused so much trouble recently," he added with a glare at the once-more-blonde god of war.

"While that sounds promising," Hades admitted, "there is the small matter of the mortals no longer believing in either us or magic."

"You can always do what my friends and I did," Harry mentioned. "We started a company with fronts in both the magical and non-magical worlds. For the non-magic side of things, we just tack on some electrical parts and the Muggles think we're selling high technology."

Ares seemed to be thinking over the concept. "Even if we somehow managed to pull this off, the mortals would just slip back into slothfulness if they aren't constantly kept off-balance."

"So schedule routine tournaments," the wizard supplied. "It worked with the old knights in the Middle Ages. These modern knights could be organized into regions or teams or something, with each division

regularly scheduled to compete against their colleagues for prizes or awards. That would be much more constructive than some meaningless war between two factions the rest of the world barely knows exist."

"He has a point, Ares," Athena stated primly. "Your efforts have been rather... wasteful of late."

The aforementioned individual ground his teeth, but withheld further comment.

"Hmm, an Olympian corporation," Zeus mused allowed, "perhaps even The Olympian Corporation. Our own planetary security force... among other things."

"And with a large enough source of new members so you won't be tempted to continually upset my affairs," Hades added with no small amount of relief.

"This could work," Ares admitted finally.

"Excellent," Harry said with a note of completion. "Since it seems like you three can haggle over the fine details without killing each other, I'll take my leave."

He donned his hat and prepared to Apparate, before turning back to the group. "Oh, one last thing," the wizard mentioned while staring levelly at both Hades and Ares. "If either of you ever so much as look at either my family or friends in a threatening manner, I will destroy you, and no pleading on your behalf will change my mind. It will be thorough, it will be painful, and it will be talked about in every dark corner of this universe for centuries to come."

Harry quickly withdrew the pair of swords that he had confiscated from them earlier and rammed the blades into the tabletop.

Smiling grimly, he insincerely added, "Have a nice day," before Apparating back to the Watchtower and, hopefully, some uninterrupted rest.

"Well, I think that went rather well," Hera spoke up in the sudden silence.

"He had some good ideas," her husband admitted, "but his behavior cannot go uncorrected. It is inexcusable."

"You know, you may have something there," the queen of the gods admitted surprisingly easily. "Now that I think of it, I know of another young man who challenged the rightful rulers of the world. He, too, went into Tartarus on behalf of his family and flew in the face of tradition. And, when the gods refused to accept their own folly, he led his family in battle and deposed them. Whatever shall we do with these renegade immortals?"

Zeus narrowed his eyes at his wife. "That was an entirely separate set of circumstances," he protested. "The Titans were a bunch of murderous, selfish tyrants who upset the natural order of things and used everyone weaker than themselves to satisfy their own perverse amusements! They had to be stopped!"

"And how do you think he perceives the three of you?" Hera asked archly.

The elderly-appearing man looked at two of his daughters. "Athena, Artemis. You have spent the most time with this 'Mr. Black'. Do you believe that he would mount an insurrection against us?"

Athena had been expecting such a question since extending their recent mediator an invitation. "He has no interest in ruling either gods or men," she replied firmly, "and so would have no such desire borne from greed. He has inherited Nemesis's... zeal... in pursuing the guilty, however. Should those he holds dear be harmed directly by our hand... he would fight every last one of us by himself, if he had to."

Artemis chuckled darkly. "And you know something else? Even if he fought by himself, I'm half afraid that the kid would still win."

Fortunately for a certain dimension-traveling wizard, the universe plodded along without suffering another potential apocalypse, and he was allowed several hours of uninterrupted rest. Once he awoke, the idyllic scenario remained, as he learned from Mr. Terrific that the League's trouble radar was mercifully clear. Finally allowing himself a sigh of relief, Harry thanked the multitasking genius and proceeded to the commissary for breakfast.

No one's luck is perfect, however, much less that of the universe's spittoon. With his attention entirely riveted to the impossible act of spearing bacon, eggs, and sausage with a plastic utensil, the wizard was virtually blindsided by a babbling, blonde whirlwind. An obviously excited Kara grabbed Harry by his coat and dragged him away from his breakfast, chatting a million miles a minute about something in the Watchtower's Research and Development section. Staring glumly at the quickly receding table, it took all of his enhanced reflexes to snatch the remains of his bagel, which he munched on while being literally flown through the crowded corridors. Fortunately, the ever useful Summoning Charm once more saved his life—or, at least, his breakfast—as his plate and glass obediently floated after the speeding Girl of Steel and her hostage.

The duo soon arrived in a large workshop, and Harry noticed that several members of the League were present and observing some sort of experiment—chief among them Green Lantern and the Flash. At the center of their interest lay a large mass of wire and other technological bits, which the techs fawned over with a multitude of strange tools and diagnostic implements.

Using his Occlumency training to review Kara's super-gushed expose, Harry looked to the bemused John Stewart and asked, "New engine for the Javelins, huh? Any good?"

The taller man nodded firmly. "Power output's up nearly fifteen percent, consumption of fuel only increased by three. There's precious little that will be able to out fly the Javelins once we get these babies installed."

Kara nodded eagerly, before leaning over the diagrams on the nearby table. Harry looked back at her, noticing her lean forward intently and then shake her head slightly. The barest trace of frustration leeches into her scent.

"Kara?" Harry questioned, drawing not only her attention but also the bored Wally West's as well. "What's the matter?"

"Oh... nothing! Nothing at all!" she chirped, clearly trying to cover up something.

Harry shook his head with a half-smile. "What did I tell you before we took off for Avalon?" he asked mock-sternly.

The cryptic comment drew the Flash's attention, his head jerking around serving to draw Green Lantern's attention as well.

Kara blinked, confused for a moment before the conversation came back to her. "Heh." The girl grinned before dropping her voice to mimic Harry's lower tones. 'Just because I had to grow up in the Stone Age doesn't mean you have to as well,' she imitated mockingly.

Harry grinned back. "Good girl," he praised while patting her on her head—much to her annoyance. "Now, go fix the techs' problem."

Kara grabbed the plans and slipped over to the people in question, motioning to a particular part on the test engine. The conversation quickly degenerated into techno babble—which was clearly the techs' primary language, as the whole group was shortly yammering away left and right to the confusion of most everyone else.

Kicking back in a conjured recliner, Harry smiled as Kara started buzzing around the experimental drive system, her engineering entourage in tow.

The Flash swallowed hard, and caught Green Lantern's eyes. "So, Joe," Flash got out in an overly casual voice, "the Stone Age?"

Harry chuckled ruefully as he suppressed the rising memories of his stay with the Dursleys. "Yeah," he nodded, "it was very lonely, not to mention boring. Very poor conversationalists, they were, not good for much beyond grunting and bellowing. Being dumped off in the arse-end of nowhere didn't really help things either. It felt like an eternity before I got back to civilization."

"Being dumped'?" John got out in a strangled voice.

Harry nodded. "The big nasty behind ole Lucy had grown powerful enough that even the Old Man couldn't do much more than stalemate him—well, not without breaking his own rules, anyway." The wizard made a dispelling gesture. "In any event, the evil bugger knew before I even came on the scene that I would be even stronger than him—so the dork lord tried to destroy me first. Long story short, his various schemes all failed and, once I escaped the neanderthals, I made sure to dispatch the old troublemaker."

He snorted at the memory. "Really anticlimactic battle, too, for all the noise and effort he expended. Thirty seconds after coming face-to-face with the git, I was walking away with another item checked off my 'to do' list."

"Well, at least the dinosaurs were cool... right?" the Scarlet Speedster finally offered

Harry blinked at the abrupt change in topic before shrugging dismissively. "I'm not sure if 'cool' is the appropriate term. They were noisy, smelly, and always invading a bloke's campsite. Heh," he chuckled, "amazing what a ten-mile-wide piece of rock crashing into a planet can do, isn't it? Come to think of it, the demons didn't much appreciate the new ice age, either. Let me tell you, nothing looks quite like a flash-fried-frozen prehistoric demon."

Kara, having finished discussing the modifications with the technicians—and gaining their exuberant permission to visit again—wandered over to the group and informed them that the engines had gained an additional fifty percent increase in power while actually dropping the fuel consumption to less than the original requirements. The blonde powerhouse concluded her bubbly speech by ordering Harry to take her to the beach—immediately.

Looking at the other two men, Harry shrugged before the shorter—and infinitely more exuberant—figure dragged him away once more.

Wally and John stared at one another and swallowed hard. An evil force, powerful enough to stalemate the Almighty Himself and command the obedience of the Morningstar... was defeated by Mr. Black in under thirty seconds. Right before he proceeded to kill off nearly three-quarters of every living thing on the planet via orbital bombardment—simply because they were poor neighbors.

Both men agreed that the other original League members needed to know this latest apocalyptic update... just as soon as they could free themselves from the paralyzing grip of total terror.

"Bah!" a stout and balding man cursed as he studied a couple of strained items. "I don't see why they have to rush it! Any idiot can see that both pieces are still flawed—they need time and tempering."

Hephaestus sighed at the same old story. His cousins, aunts, and uncles were rushing things—again—and he could already see how things would ultimately end. Like always, he would have to pick up the pieces and re-forge them, along with devising a plan to do things properly. Despite the many, many times in which he had attempted to educate his family, they still worried about irrelevant quirks while overlooking the real flaws.

The long-lived smith decided that—this time—he would provide a bit of preventative maintenance. The situation was rapidly spiraling out of control, and it was long past time for him to intervene—before the pieces were tempered too fine and too brittle and became worthless. Looking around his workroom, Hephaestus pondered his strategy before stomping over to his table and sketching his latest idea.

'Hmm... perhaps if that almost fatally flawed piece there was inserted here... then those two items could be reworked over there. That would allow these supports to be introduced here...' He looked back on his plan and smiled. If executed correctly, there would no longer be several disconnected and broken items, but rather one strong, supported structure.

Harry was enjoying the strange multicolored drink bearing both a questionable name and a paper umbrella. Upon Apparating the girl to her desired destination, he had discarded his cloak and shifted his robe into a suitable pair of swimming trunks. The girl immediately proceeded to acquire a small patch of real estate on the sunny and rather crowded beach—which lay conveniently adjacent to a cocktail bar, the origin of the odd beverage. On the average, Henchgirl's blend of cola was still better, but the colored concoction was more than acceptable.

While his vampirism was distinctly uncomfortable in the ultraviolet-rich environment, Harry had no plans on vacating the premises anytime soon. One good reason was the fact that suffering a crowded beach and having sand in his hair were part of being normal, a sensation he desperately craved. Ergo, he strived to act like any other ordinary person on vacation.

Or, at least, an ordinary magical person. The beach was packed with lounging adults and rowdy children, after all, and the

suspiciously empty fifteen foot radius surrounding his and Kara's towels was not that abnormal, right?

Harry was willing to admit—to himself, at least—that there was a second valid reason for remaining on the sandy beach for as long as possible. Kara deigned to debut some rather revealing swimwear from a recent purchase, and the wizard found himself enjoying their second date tremendously.

Of course, several other male bystanders had similar revelations, hence his impromptu bit of warding—and a few discreet hexes. Normality, he decided, was highly overrated in certain extreme situations.

After another circumspect bit of spell casting—a cheeky bugger had the nerve to walk right past them, look at Kara, and whistle— Harry leaned back on the towel with a satisfied smile.

"Was that really necessary, Joe?" the aforementioned extraterrestrial inquired amusedly.

His grin grew larger as the target stumbled across the path of an upset crab—which proceeded to clamp itself to the offending bare foot in retaliation. Manfully suppressing a giggle, Harry asked, "Was what necessary, Kara?"

"That." She indicated the increasingly painful spectacle with a tilt of her head. While hopping on the non-crab-infested foot, the other man had somehow stepped in a plastic sand bucket. His new cylindrical footwear apparently lacked traction control, however, as the individual promptly fell face first onto a jellyfish that had just washed ashore.

"I haven't the slightest idea what you're talking about," Harry protested self-righteously.

The bikini-clad super heroine lightly swatted the wizard's shoulder. "Of course you—oh, she just didn't!"

"Come again?" her bemused boyfriend asked confusedly.

"Miss I've-gotta-bend-over-backwards-to-reach-my-purse," the short meta human fumed as she glared at a new arrival. Sure enough, an

attractive and apparently limber woman was setting up her spot not far from the pair's own towel. "Please, those are so totally fake! And that hair? I've seen a more convincing shade on cheap dolls!"

Harry chuckled. "Easy, Kitten. How about you retract those claws before you heat vision the poor woman or something?"

The Argosian did a poor job of affecting disinterest in their new neighbor as a corner of the woman's beach towel caught ablaze. "I don't know what you're talking about," she unconsciously echoed his earlier sentiment.

"Sure you don't," he agreed teasingly. "You know, you're pretty cute when you're jealous."

"Shut up, you," she replied before stretching in a feline manner across his lap. "Now, how about you concern yourself with putting that suntan lotion on my back?"

Harry glanced down at the young woman questioningly. "You're physically invulnerable to harm and are powered by the yellow sun. There's no way that you can get a sunburn."

The blonde looked up at him patiently. "Are you gonna pass up an opportunity to feel up your girlfriend?"

"Good point," he agreed immediately as he reached for her bag.

Hera walked into her son's cluttered workshop. Blacksmithing was hardly the career that she would have chosen for her physically handicapped progeny—in fact, she did not find the messy occupation even remotely appealing. Historically, her inventive son's experiments—which he insistently referred to as 'solutions'—could often be considered even worse than the original problem.

Still, of all of the various gods and goddesses, Hephaestus was one of the few who felt it necessary to physically work for a living, literally carving out his own domain amongst both mortals and immortals alike. In fact, it was this kinship he shared with both classes of sentient creatures that sent the queen goddess to his realm so often. She had received some confusing news by way of Thanatos and hoped that the worldly smith could help explain the matter.

As near as she could tell, the various Deaths from all the Pantheons were holding their centennial union meeting—which was hardly newsworthy. After all, the Death Union regularly held such a gathering to coordinate scheduled leaves and whatnot. What she did find strange, however, was the unusual absence of any designated Death to remain in the mortal realm and handle the transitions from life to the afterlife. The information she gathered from Bacchus—who was once again denied admittance to the eclectic forum—suggested that every Death was to attend, with no designated 'substitute'.

Hephaestus was right where she expected him to be, tending his blast furnace. "Hello, Son," the Greek queen of the gods called out to the smith.

"Hello, Mother," he replied as he withdrew a glowing sword from the fire and began hammering it on his anvil. "Is there something wrong?"

"Can't a mother come visit her son every once in a while?" Hera asked with a smile.

Sighing, the smith finished his adjustments and thrust the blade back into the forge. Grabbing a towel, he blunted stated, "You were here only a month ago, and you're not due for another visit for at least six more. That means that either something's gone wrong, or something's about to."

Rolling her eyes, Hera sat down at the table. "I suppose that it's a bit of both, depending on how you interpret this event."

The smith sat down opposite his mother. "What situation concerns you?" he inquired.

The elder goddess conjured a pot of coffee and two cups. "The Deaths have begun sequestering themselves for their centennial union meeting," she began, pouring two servings from the pitcher.

Hephaestus snorted and accepted the proffered cup. "That's news?"

Sipping at her own mug, she replied, "That's part of it. What troubles me is that all the Deaths seem to be attending this time, rather than just the first shift. With no one remaining behind, no mortal will die

until the conference concludes. It will be nearly as bad as the time when Thanatos was chained."

"They did leave someone minding the shop," the smith nearly growled. "That's the real problem."

Hera looked confused. "Whatever do you mean? Surely that's a good thing."

"It means that I now have to repair the mess that all of the others are making of young Harry's life," he replied shortly before upending the cup.

This revelation surprised the elder goddess. "Harry? I thought we agreed after the council to not induct him for a few more centuries, so he could acclimate to his current position in the world as a protector before learning of his other... potential."

Hephaestus grunted in affirmation. "We did. Unfortunately, several busybodies are rushing to build a pantheon around the boy before he's ready for it."

"Well, I admit that it is perhaps a tad sooner than normal for such actions, but I don't see the harm," Hera stated when she saw the expression on her son's face.

"I'm a smith," he stated. "In modern terminology, that means a combination of scientist, inventor, manufacturer, and businessman. Between all those roles, I can generally comprehend why our family members behave as they do, as well as predict the results of their actions." Pausing to ensure that his mother followed his reasoning, Hephaestus continued, "Well, someone went too far and too fast. For example, they are putting Harry and that extraterrestrial Kara In-Ze together—along with a readymade family—when every single one of them has flaws that could conceivably destroy them all."

"What flaws are these?" Hera queried anxiously as she considered the smith's assertion seriously. While it was not unheard of to promote mortal descendants as reward for great deeds on Earth, it was rare to gift one so far removed from the line with immortality before they proved themselves. Of course, after his masterful performance in bringing her husband and brother-in-law eye-to-eye, most of her family believed that Harry already had proven himself.

'Eris certainly seems to have taken a liking to him...' she thought to herself amusedly.

Hephaestus thought for a moment and began, "Well, the Argosian girl has already lost her family, her friends... pretty much her entire civilization. While she's slowly making progress, my research shows that she still has abandonment issues, which has left her more than a little epicurean as a result. This flighty demeanor could very well lead into trouble in the future unless she can confront her fear and prove it groundless. Not only that, Aphrodite tells me that the girl has a slight fear of our recent guest finding her wanting, due to her unfamiliarity with the occult."

The smith huffed irritably. "Not that our recent mediator is any better. Whether by accident or design, he takes on every responsibility that comes along, despite how much he might grumble about doing so. Harry reasons that he can best prevent harm coming to his friends by taking the risks himself. Because of the abilities he's already mastered and his success at resolving the mortals' issues for them, more than one world is becoming increasingly reliant on him—and with his tacit approval, no less. For Tartarus's sake, even we're relying on him now! Then you have the Deaths and how they've dumped the responsibility for an entire universe in his hands before skipping off to their little party. When you combine that with his other burdens... well, none of us is strong enough to bear that much strain indefinitely, but he seems unable to act otherwise. Considering the Deaths' slipshod introduction, the kid's not even totally accepted that part of his destiny—which leads to his biggest flaw. He sees himself as some sort of mixed-breed freak, and is simply waiting for everyone around him to reach the same conclusion."

Hera frowned thoughtfully. "But he's doing fine! He got those two old goats to finally agree on something and end this millennia long stand-off; he's bringing honor to his post and name; he's got a supportive girlfriend and attentive friends. He's got a good head on his shoulders; I think he's going to make it."

"Is that the Hera the Queen of Olympus saying that? Or is that Hera I'm-glad-my-family's-not-feuding-anymore saying that?"

"I don't understand."

"Mother, you're taking the easy way out, just like everyone else has regarding him. You glanced at the surface and found a reason not to get involved. Harry's a natural-born fighter—maybe even one of the best—but he's been hit too many times. One blow after another, too hard and too fast and the next blow could put him down and keep him down. Pride and wishful thinking won't change that—not even yours."

Hephaestus shook his head dismissively. "Anyway, the two children have their own problems, mostly self-worth and identity crises. Granted, it's nothing that Harry and Kara together couldn't address—if they weren't distracted by their own problems, that is. It's the same story with the rest of his hangers-on, like Kara's clone sister or that plant elemental girl that Demeter was going on about the other day. They all need help in one form or another—and Harry is trying—but there are some problems that he's simply ill-equipped to solve."

Hera reviewed his words as she sipped her drink. Her son had brought up several very well considered points—as always. "What is your solution, then?" she finally asked.

Hephaestus grinned and pointed to an opened box. "Well, I just so happen to have an old pair of cursed shackles lying around collecting dust. Suppose that those shackles found their way to Earth and somehow encountered one of the chief instigators of all these problems. Then suppose that the cursed articles give Harry some well deserved rest while forcing his little clique to rely on themselves to solve the problem and eventually free him. There's no need for any elaborate solution, perhaps just a small quest to gather the components for the key," he suggested while holding said key out for her inspection. "Nothing too rigorous... maybe just a short trip to an out-of-the-way Temple or two—something like that."

Laughing, he continued, "I mean... it's not beyond the bounds of reason that his little family might even realize some self-worth on the journey, not to mention that my nephew might finally accept that he's a good person doing a good work, but that he isn't required to hold all of creation together single-handedly."

Hera snorted at her son's display of glee. "And from the conversations you exchanged with your wife earlier, I suppose that you're also looking forward to ribbing Diana's choice of romantic

interests during her upcoming visit, as she's the only capable guide for this little quest?"

There was a large grin from Hephaestus as he gestured towards the side of the shop. "Who do you think I'm marking that armor for? If her mortal intended keeps getting involved in these matters, he's going to need it. A few golden apples from time to time probably wouldn't be amiss, either."

The goddess shook her head before becoming serious once more. "Why have you gone to such efforts, Hephaestus? You must have gone through considerable trouble to amass all of this research so quickly. What about our uninformed descendant has so garnered your interest?"

Smiling in a satisfied manner, he asked, "Isn't it obvious? After the blonde airhead's public defeat and shaming, Aphrodite's lost all interest in pursuing Ares romantically. Even ignoring our relation by blood, that feat alone earns Harry and his little family my undying gratitude."

Hera just nodded, deciding against informing her son of his wife's sudden interest in a certain young incarnation of Death.

The pocket in Harry's transfigured swimming trunks started to vibrate, causing the wizard to frown in thought. He then realized that his Zippo was to blame and quickly retrieved the device.

"Black here," he answered.

"Hi, Mr. Black," Pamela Isley greeted, the sounds of a scuffle nearly rendering her inaudible. "I'm sorry to bother you, but there's a problem with one of the applying stage performers."

The wizard rubbed his temples before inquiring, "How so?"

"Well, this purple-haired sorceress came in a little while ago, looking for a singing job. Everything was going smoothly until Zatanna and Wonder Woman suddenly appeared—literally. As soon as the Amazon caught sight of Circe—the singer I mentioned—the pair started really going at it. Then Harley and Roxy got back from their errands, and now they're cheering on the other two!"

He groaned again. "Fine," Harry grumbled, "I'm on my way."

"I better come, too," Kara offered. "Maybe I can reason with them."

Harry just looked at her blankly.

"Anything's possible, right?" she asked with a shrug. "Besides, the sooner we finish, the sooner we can come back here."

He snorted at her optimism before accepting her outstretched hand and Apparated the pair back to the Leaky Cauldron—where Zatanna, Pamela, Harley and Roxy were taking cover behind the counter as Circe and Diana did their very best to destroy the building and each other.

"Well, you're up," Harry told the blonde girl at his side as he leaned against the counter and seized a beer for himself.

Kara strode over to the feuding females and attempted to interrupt them. Her diplomatic efforts were ultimately in vain, however, as she received a glancing blow from Diana as the Amazon swatted at Circe with a confiscated support column. Harry thoughtfully snatched the Argosian out of the air before she could collide with anyone else.

"Fine!" she spat. "I give up! They're all yours."

Harry tipped his hat and told those standing near him to cover their ears. Wandlessly casting a Sonorous Charm on himself, he loudly ordered, "Enough! You are behaving like children! Now, Diana, put that column back where you found it. Circe, extinguish those tables while there's still something left to salvage."

Much to everyone's amazement—especially that of the two women in question—both the Amazon and the sorceress did as instructed.

"Thank you," he continued when they were finished. "Now, one at a time, tell me exactly what started this fight. Diana, you may go first."

"Zee and I teleported down from the Watchtower," the raven-haired warrior began. "She's supposed to meet Tim here for a... tutoring session, I think, and I was relaying a message for Raven from

Mother. She had expressed an interest in training Raven, in light of her new abilities."

Harry nodded at the woman's sensible suggestion, as Raven's new physiology would necessitate a different fighting style than she had been previously accustomed. Who better to teach her the female side of the martial arts than the Amazons, who practically wrote the book on empowered immortal women?

Upon hearing mention of Hippolyta, the purple-haired sorceress started to interrupt, but a sharp glare from Harry curtailed her response.

"When we got here," Diana continued, "I saw Circe talking with Pamela Isley."

After several ensuing moments of silence, Harry prompted, "And..."

"That's when I engaged her in battle," Wonder Woman concluded.

On second thought, perhaps he could find his daughter a different hand-to-hand instructor. Hopefully, a more even-tempered one.

Turning to the other combatant, the wizard prompted, "Alright, Circe. Anything you want to add?"

"Just that I was minding my own business when this Amazon harpy jumped me."

"Like we would believe that!" Diana spat. "There's no telling what nefarious plot you were concocting here!" Turning back to Harry, she continued, "The last time she showed her face in Man's World, she turned me into a... something."

Harry raised a hand to get her attention. "Actually, she was responding to our advertisement for stage performers," he supplied. "From what I've heard, she's quite the vocalist."

"She's something, alright," the Amazon princess retorted quietly.

He sighed resignedly. "You know, we really need to address your society's impulse control problem—this is the second feud in as many days that's dropped itself in my lap. Still," he allowed while

glancing at the purple-haired sorceress, "I can understand your reasoning."

Harry shook his head disbelievingly. "I've got to ask... why settle for a simple transfiguration? Hardly the route I'd choose for revenge."

She shrugged. "I've always been good with pigs. Besides, I knew that it'd get Hippolyta all wound up. She's the one I had a grudge with, after all."

"To each his—or her—own, I suppose," the wizard finally acknowledged. "I'm rather particular to albino ferret transfigurations myself."

Circe nodded. "I tried to do a ferret a time or two; never could get the feet proportional to everything else."

"That part is rather tricky," Harry agreed. "I had to practice it more than a few times myself." At the witch's curious look, he elaborated. "I saw it used once and thought it an amusing spell to learn. Still, that's hardly sporting of you, attacking someone with virtually no defense against magic."

"Hey, I'd just gotten paroled from Tartarus—which was due to her dearest mommy," the witch explained with an indignant huff. "After a few millennia of hanging by my ankles and having my fingers gnawed each night by weasels, I was... upset."

"It was the will of the gods that punished you for your crimes against humanity, witch!" Diana protested.

"Wait a second!" Harry interrupted as the two women seemed ready to renew their battle. "Let me get this straight. Circe was sentenced to thousands of years in Tartarus... for transfiguring people into animals?"

The sorceress hurried to confirm his query, while the Amazon just as rapidly added, "She aided Hades' attempt to overthrow Mount Olympus."

Harry nodded. "I know—we've discussed the matter. Circe did the right thing, Diana. Zeus was dangerously close to upsetting the

balance between life and death. Had he succeeded, the universe itself might have collapsed."

The wizard looked thoughtful for a few moments. "By any chance, was Zeus the one who sentenced you?" he asked the purple-haired goddess. At her nod, he groaned. "No wonder Hades was fit to be tied," he muttered. "Alright," he continued in a louder tone, "I'll go talk to them again and see if we can't get you some sort of compensation for your wrongful imprisonment. If you would, give me a list of any other incidents like this one, and I'll resolve them all at once." The wizard shook his disbelievingly. "I can't believe that he had the audacity to misuse the underworld for this!"

"But what about all those things she did?" Diana protested.

"She did behave more than a little juvenile," Harry noted reprovably, "but it sounds to me as nothing more than a prank taken too far. I assure you, if Circe had seriously meant anyone any lasting harm, she could have done something far worse than a few spells taught to children."

"That's right, Princess Piggy," the female magician said smugly.

"Still, it did get out of hand," Harry reminded her. "You might consider apologizing for your part in this mess."

"Apologize?" Circe demanded. "To her?"

Harry nodded. "To Diana, her people, Zatanna here, and Batman," he specified.

Reluctantly, she agreed, on the condition that she received similar treatment from the involved parties.

"Lovely," he concluded, "so... have you auditioned yet?"

"No, the world's strongest harlot interrupted me," she answered. At his warning look, she dropped the line of conversation and took the stage. Her interview took the form of a riveting ballad, which even Diana had to admit was well delivered.

After discussing the matter, Harry informed the performing goddess that she was hired. "I also have a second proposition for you," he

continued. "My son Tim is a natural at Transfiguration, you see, while my strong suit is more towards wards and hexes."

"And running off to face overwhelming odds by yourself," Kara added helpfully, still miffed over being cut out of the recent brawl.

Ignoring the blonde extra terrestrial, Harry continued, "So I was wondering... have you ever considered a career in tutoring?"

Dumbfounded, the purple-haired woman just blinked at him.

"Well, Amanda?" President Langley prompted once the remaining Cadmus staff advisors were gathered. "Has your team validated the recovered artifact yet?"

"We have, Mr. President," the short Department Head replied. "Once obtaining the mysteriously donated relic from the Smithsonian's Department of Admissions, we ran the full battery of tests. Carbon dating places the manufactured item in the right era, and the excavation site certainly lends credence towards this being the genuine article. If the legends are to be believed, these could very well be the famed shackles that Sisyphus used to bind Thanatos millennia ago. However, the only definite method to prove their authenticity is to use them."

Langley nodded approvingly. "Good, good. When can they put in play?"

"Mr. President?" Waller questioned disbelievingly. The former Cadmus supervisor would be the first to admit that the immortal... whatever he was... was a potential threat ⁵ every single report she could scan indicated previously unheard of abilities, as well as a vengeful mindset to use said powers. In fact, it was rumored that the so called 'Mr. Black' was even more dangerous than the whole Justice League space station and all its metapowered tenants combined.

When she locked eyes with the enigma in human form after Eiling's rather embarrassing demise, it was quite evident to her that Black was not someone one should have as an enemy. True, if the Presidential advisors' shoddy plan actually worked—a possibility so low that it was, quite frankly, laughable—an enormous threat to America would disappear. But, as was far more likely, if it failed...

Perhaps the Almighty would be inclined to intervene on their behalf, because it was doubtful that anyone else could save them.

Waller quickly composed herself. "Mr. President," she repeated, "I must advise against this course of action. Not only is the projected likelihood of success abysmally low, but my people have also analyzed all available information on this relic and modeled a few of the most probable scenarios. First, based on the existing data, we cannot even be certain that Mr. Black will be stopped. The accounts only state that Death's power was halted while the shackles were worn, not that Thanatos himself was affected."

"But as you said," the elected official addressed, "there is no way to be certain of their effects upon him without using them."

"That is correct, Sir," the woman replied, "but we can predict the consequences of employing the shackles. If these chains are what we believe them to be, then Death itself would be stopped, not just Black. Perhaps even for the entire country, or the world. Heck, for all I know, maybe even the whole universe would be affected. If such a thing ever came to pass, we would effectively doom ourselves. With our current resources—food, shelter, basic necessities—we could not withstand the ensuing population boom for more than a couple weeks. And then you have to factor in the health issues of clinically dead bodies still walking around, generating waste... Mr. President, this course of action is not simply unwise. It's insane."

The room was silent for a few moments. "Thank you, Amanda," President Langley finally replied. "We will shelve this option to be used as a last resort. Unless there is any new business, you are adjourned."

"Sorry, Waller," Dr. Emil Hamilton muttered to himself from within the confines of his secured laboratory, "but I signed on to neutralize the metahuman threat, and this Mr. Black could be worse than an entire army of Supermen." Pocketing a device he had hoped to never use, the scientist paged his all-but-adopted daughter.

Within a few moments, Galatea sped into the laboratory. "Sorry I'm late," the cloned Argosian greeted. "There was an earthquake out west that I was helping to clean up after. So... what's up?"

"It's good to see you again, Galatea," Hamilton greeted, "but this wasn't a social call. I have a task for you. You see, there was an artifact recently donated to the Smithsonian museum that was apparently unearthed some time ago in the ruins of a Greek temple. Research has pointed out that they possess a kind of energy field, with some interesting results." He paused. "The original box they were found in had an inscription on it, naming it the Sisyphus Box."

"So?" the white-clad woman shrugged. "What do you want me to do? Go get you a refund?"

"Not a fan of mythology, I take it?" Emil stated, rather than asked. "Let me tell you a brief story." He went on to relay as much information as he had on the Sisyphus myth, focusing chiefly on the manner in which the wily Greek managed to bind Thanatos and halt death.

Galatea saw where this was going. "No. I'm not going to do it."

Hamilton pretended that he did not hear the woman's refusal. "It isn't such a big leap of faith to think that they are the shackles of legend. If the tale can be believed..."

"No! I refuse! Not only is Joe my friend, he's also dating my sister! I will not betray—"

"So they've corrupted you, too," he sighed. "Galatea, you're going to help me stop the threat to normal people whether you want to... or not." Hamilton reluctantly withdrew his contingency plan and pointed the specialized remote at the woman, activating a dormant module of her implanted neural inhibitor. "Now, this is what you are going to do..."

Once it became obvious that some higher power decreed their day at the beach to be continually interrupted, the pair decided to spend the rest of their day engaging in some other activity. Kara's vote, which Harry quickly discovered carried more weight than his own, was for shopping. Again. Her chief argument seemed to be that a boyfriend who could carry an infinite number of bags was an advantage to be used at every opportunity. Protests that she had gone on a spending frenzy not twenty four hours earlier for new shoes were immediately countered with an expressed need to find matching accessories for the aforementioned footwear.

The Argosian further used the arrival of a strangely reticent Galatea to gain the majority vote—not that the young woman seemed to require such a thing only moments prior. The wizard submitted to the inevitable and the three soon found themselves in yet another shopping center, much to his disgust.

While Kara was admiring a fluffy white sweater, her sister approached the bored Harry. "Joe, can I talk to you for a moment—in private?"

"Sure, Tea." Harry smiled at the young woman before following her to an uninhabited portion of the store. "What can I do for you?"

Seeing that Kara was sufficiently distracted and not paying them any mind, Galatea made her move. "Could you close your eyes for a second? It's a surprise."

Again, Harry could detect something decidedly different about the girl, but her scent was undeniably that of Kara's sister, so he ignored his misgivings. He was at a loss, however, to explain the slight tremor in her voice or the nervous pounding of her heart. While most people behaved similarly around him, he had thought that Galatea had outgrown her discomfort of his presence. Shrugging to himself, Harry closed his eyes. Protesting would only make her even more nervous, after all.

He felt her take his hands and pull them together between them. There was a slight sound of metal rattling against itself before Death's ring sent a sharp exclamatory thought straight into his mind—as if warning him of something. He opened his eyes a moment too late, as a pair of ancient-looking shackles closed around his wrists and flooded him with a cold sensation.

"Why—?" Harry tried to ask before the obviously magical binds rendered him unconscious.

Her mission complete, Galatea's inhibitor chip disengaged, and the realization of what she involuntarily did to one of the few people who treated her as an actual person sent her to her knees, bawling.

The commotion drew Kara's attention from the sweater. Recognizing her sister's voice, she quickly followed the discontented sounds to

their source —and stopped cold, unable to believe her eyes. Her sister was kneeling on the store's floor, with Joe's head pillowed in her lap. There were chains locked around her boyfriend's wrists, and she belatedly realized that the man was unconscious.

No, he was not merely unconscious—he was not even breathing.

"What happened?" Kara demanded as she dropped to her knees as well.

"I-I didn't mean to!" the distraught Galatea blurted. "It was my fath... Emil Hamilton. He wanted me to put these Sisyphus shackle things on Joe. I refused, and he pulled out this weird r-remote and pointed it to me! I saw what was happening, but I couldn't stop myself! I didn't do this on purpose, I swear!"

Kara struggled to break the shackles, only to find them resistant to her best efforts. Even the two women combined were unable to damage the nefarious devices. Struggling to remain rational, Kara decided, "We'll deal with Hamilton later. First, we need to get Joe back to the Watchtower. Maybe the mystics or one of the League's medics can get him fixed."

The shorter blonde woman picked up Harry's inanimate body even as her sister called the space station for an emergency teleport.

"He can't die," Kara whispered disconsolately as the trio disappeared in a flash of light. "Not him, too."

"Wakey wakey, eggs and bacey," an annoyingly cheerful voice called. Harry groaned and opened his eyes and, for a split second, he thought that he was looking into a mirror. Right after that observation, however, his mind began picking up subtle little variations, such as a lack of scarring, different colored eyes, and mono colored hair.

With a jolt, he finally realized that he was not seeing his face, but his father's.

"Am I dead?" Harry eventually asked.

"That's pretty funny coming from you," James Potter replied with a smile. "To answer your question... not exactly. I guess this is what

you'd call a 'near death' experience, 'cept of course that you're not near you at the moment if you know what I mean. Not that I'm complaining, mind you—Lils and I've wanted to properly meet you for a while now."

Harry nodded slowly and sat up on the... well, for lack of a better word, bright mist. His surroundings were not so much hidden by cloudy vapor as the cloudy vapor had not yet formed into surroundings. The floor on which he lay seemed to be white as well. It was neither warm nor cold, but simply there—a flat, blank something on which to be.

"I'm going out on a limb here, but since you look a whole lot like me, I'm guessing... James?"

"You are correct, Sir," his almost doppelganger nodded.

"But I was under the impression that you were dead?"

The identified James Potter nodded in a manner eerily reminiscent of Dobby. "Oh, I'm very much dead."

"But... I'm not?" Harry repeated.

"Not entirely, no."

"Any chance you want to tell me what the frack's going on?" the latter generation Potter demanded.

"Good thing your mother isn't here," James professed. "You'd get smacked for that one."

"Why isn't she here?" the other wizard asked confusedly.

"Oh, she'll be along. Your mother's still berating that fairy Viviane for saddling you with another set of problems—has been for a while now, actually."

Harry frowned. "So... you guys know about that, then?" he asked resignedly.

"Oh, yeah," his apparent father answered cheerfully, "we get to check in on things now and then... As hard as it is to admit, I think

you've topped all the Marauders put together with as much trouble as you've gotten in over the years. I know Padfoot's impressed."

"So Sirius is here as well?" Harry asked before another thought struck him. "How'd you all get here, anyway? Last I checked I was in another dimension."

"Oh, all the Afterlives are connected together; that's how Lils got to the fairy's little everafter for their... talk. I think Padfoot's off chasing nymphs at the moment, in case you were wondering, but I left him a note to come meet us."

The two fell silent and just stared at each other in the misty nothingness.

"So..." James finally spoke, "Seeker, huh?"

Unfortunately, the combined efforts of the League personnel were unable to free Harry from his restraints. Clark had no more luck breaking the device than the two girls did—nor did John's ring, Shayera's mace, Bruce's array of gadgets, or even the combined efforts of Zatanna, Dr. Fate, Jason Blood, and the Atom. The desperate group even brought the crew from the Leaky Cauldron, reasoning that Raven, Tim, and Pamela possessed a portion of Harry's power and were therefore more likely to affect the restraints.

"Too bad we can't just wake him up," Tim commented to the Mistress of Magic. "I bet he could tell us how to remove them."

Zatanna nodded. "Probably, but how would we—?"

"Would that work?" Jason Blood asked as he walked over to the nurse's station and retrieved their coffee pot.

"It's worth a shot," Supergirl voiced as several of the Leaguers eyed the glass container warily. Fetching a funnel, the blonde woman proceeded to pour the caffeinated substance into the comatose magician.

Her actions did garner a response, though not one she desired. Harry did seem to rouse slightly, but did not wake. Instead, he seemed to be in the grasp of some horrid nightmare. The bound

man shifted restlessly on the hospital bed as he grimaced, spouting off unintelligible comments in a range of foreign languages.

"What's happening?" Kara demanded worriedly. "What's he saying?"

"He's... experiencing a nightmare, I think," Diana finally answered. "Or a memory. I don't recognize all the languages that he's speaking, but the bits I can translate appear unrelated. Right now, he's speaking in Coptic... Sanskrit... Avestan... I can't even guess at what the hissing means."

"It's something about fighting a Dark Lord named Voldemort," Raven quietly informed the group, garnering more than a few odd glances.

Harry's ramblings suddenly changed intonation again. "Now what is he saying?" the Argosian asked.

"I think he's reliving a fight with some demon," the Amazon hazarded a guess. "He's saying something about... Auschwitz...?"

The group exchanged concerned glances as the room's temperature rose inexplicably. "Hit the decks!" Jason Blood yelled in warning. Immediately following on the heels of his admonition, a ring of flame burst out of Harry's muttering form. The fiery torus expanded violently, searing a line of devastation five feet off the ground in a radius of about fifty feet.

"Sedate him—now!" Batman ordered sharply.

Wally attempted to comply, but the syringe's needle failed to penetrate the wizard's skin. "It's not working!" the Fastest Man Alive yelled worriedly as the air around Harry began to heat up again. "I can't get the needle to go in!"

"Let me try," Pamela Isley interposed. "Everyone hold your breath," she warned as she—for lack of a better word—pollinated the air directly above Harry's head with golden dust. Fortunately for the Watchtower's structural integrity, however, the pollen seemed to have a calming influence on the distressed magician, and he once more slipped into the dead-like sleep. Once the golden cloud had evaporated, the queen of Green announced, "Okay, it's safe."

"What was that?" Batman demanded.

"A highly concentrated combination of Kava, Valerian, and Passion Flower," the redhead supplied. "I made it strong enough to knock out a human for the better part of a month—hopefully, it will keep Mr. Black asleep long enough to remove those shackles."

"I can't believe this!" Kara fumed. "Nothing works!"

The perfect definition of 'courage under fire', Batman looked her way. "Calm down, Supergirl. Your histrionics will not aid this situation."

"But look at him!" she ordered worriedly. "He's clinically dead!"

"Umm... isn't that normal for him?" the until-now forgotten Roxy Rocket questioned aloud. "I mean, him being dead hasn't been a problem before now."

"Well, this certainly is," Wally spoke up, drawing the group's attention to a live television broadcast. A panicking news anchor was on part of the screen, while the other portion was playing clips from some horror movie. The Fastest Man Alive increased the volume.

"—assure you that this is not a joke," the worried televised man announced. "It seems that the 'Day of the Living Dead' is no longer just a movie. We're receiving reports from all around the globe; while the cause is currently unknown, all living things are no longer able to die. Victims of disfiguring accidents, burns, and drowning— it seems that ailments that once proved fatal not so long ago are deadly no more. People with the most gruesome injuries remain ambulatory, unable to escape their unending pain. Eyewitness reports claim—"

The League stared at the screen as the morbid clips aired uncensored: people who carried their own decapitated heads under their arms, people and pets with only half a head, people with the blue complexion of someone who suffocated. The situation was the same in every instance. People were screaming, yelling, crying, and begging for the pain to stop—to no avail.

The newsroom anchor reappeared on the screen, mercifully interrupting the montage. "As more and more incidents are being called in, there is only one question on everyone's lips—does this global calamity signal the end times?"

"We have to do something," Clark blurted, reflecting the entire League's opinion on the matter.

"I'm with ya, Big Guy," Wally said, "but in case you haven't noticed, we only have one Death on the payroll, and he's not going to be much help at the moment."

Raven looked up at the Scarlet Speedster's comment. "That may not be entirely correct," she said. As everyone turned to her, she continued, "When we were attacked yesterday, I accidentally ordered a group of animated skeletons to stop attacking us and they obeyed. If Father gave me that ability, then I might be able to help... if I had his scythe, anyway. But I don't know where he keeps it."

"Check his pockets," Kara suggested. "Rao knows he keeps everything else in there. Meanwhile, someone needs to contact his family. Maybe one of them can suggest something."

"I'm on it," the youthful Tim Hunter agreed before producing a Zippo and following her instructions.

"You coming?" Raven entreated Zatanna before ducking into the comatose wizard's inner coat pocket.

"I just know I'm gonna regret this," the other woman grumbled before removing her top hat and following the younger witch into the pocket dimension.

The Caped Crusader turned to the Amazon at his side. "What more can you tell us about these shackles?" he asked. "Are there any other methods of removing them besides the key?"

"I don't know much more than what's already been said," Diana admitted regrettably. "The last time they were used, it took the god of war to unlock them," she admitted, "and Ares is probably still smarting from the beating Mr. Black gave him and Hades. It's doubtful that he'd help us." She paused for a moment. "I might be able to... extract... the answer from the god who made them, though."

Shayera smiled viciously and slapped her mace against her other hand. "I like the sound of that," the Thanagarian woman announced.

"Count me in," Kara seconded, closely followed by Galatea's own voiced desire to make amends.

Waller irritably turned off her television after watching the physical consequences of her unheeded warnings. "I wonder which one of those fools is responsible," she muttered as she withdrew one of the secured telephones from its hiding place and dialed a long-distance number from memory.

"Wayne Manor, this is Alfred Pennyworth speaking," a distinguished male voice answered.

"I need to talk to your boss," she stated bluntly. "Put him on a secured line."

"Master Wayne is currently in a vital meeting, Madame," the butler replied, "and left instructions not to be disturbed."

Amanda snorted. "I'm sure he is," she agreed sarcastically. "Call him anyway and tell him that Waller needs to talk with him ^{now} now." The Secretary of Metahuman Affairs replaced the phone in its cradle abruptly.

"Well, Rich Boy," she sighed, "I hope you've got another miracle on that belt of yours. I've got a feeling that we're going to need it about now."

"Ouch!" Zatanna cried as she stubbed her toe against more of the pocket clutter. "How can he ever find anything in all this mess?"

"If you think this is bad, you should see Beast Boy's room sometime," the younger witch rejoined. "What did you trip over?"

"A bunch of crates of... something. Shine your light over here."

Raven complied and read off the container's label. "East India Trading Company? It looks like... tea."

Zatanna snorted. "I had wondered why we sailed out of Boston on the Avalon voyage. Why am I not surprised that he had something to do with the Boston Tea Party as well?"

"Hey! Look at this weird car," the girl called out from further in the pocket.

The elder witch carefully made her way past the chaotically stacked beverage to inspect the latest find. The silver two-door sedan was a strange looking vehicle to be certain, what with the collection of exposed electrical cables, jet engine exhaust, and hideously complex instrument panels inside the machine.

"Any ideas why your dad has a weird De Lorean in his pocket?" the Mistress of Magic inquired.

Her companion just shook her head and continued to visually explore the apparent vehicular section of the pocket. She could only identify a few of the various ships, cars, and planes haphazardly parked around them.

"Let's look over this way for Mr. Black's scythe," Zatanna called. "I saw something glowing."

"If you're talking about the golden glow coming from behind the pile of road signs, then forget it. It's just an old ram's pelt."

Zatanna was silent for a few moments. "No, I mean the golden glow coming from the other way."

"What way?" Raven asked shortly as she studied the burned husk of a giant zeppelin.

"Just follow the path between the World War II biplane and the stuffed Tyrannosaurus Rex," the other female advised.

"And where's the T-Rex?"

"Behind the giant frozen robot," Zatanna supplied. "I'm almost to the... never mind. False alarm."

"What was it?"

"An ornate golden box with a bunch of Hebrew words carved in it," Zatanna answered in an obviously forced calm tone.

That caught the girl's attention, causing her to swiftly fly to the other woman's location. "You don't think that's really..."

"Well, history does say that it mysteriously vanished despite being a closely guarded relic," the top hat-wearing woman allowed. "And look at that wooden cup he has next to it... if that's what I think it is, mankind's been searching for it for over two millenia now."

"Hey, I think that we're getting closer," Raven announced. "There's an ancient spear over here... looks to be Roman, I think. I'm getting a weird feeling off it."

"Right," Zatanna uneasily announced, "let's try a different section."

"I contacted Henchgirl," Tim announced. "She's sending a care package to help us out. It may be a few minutes, though." He stuck his head in the coat pocket and called for Zatanna and Raven to return. Once they had complied, he continued. "Raven, our... aunt, I guess, said that Joe keeps his weapons in those gauntlets, but that they only respond to some unique magical signature of his. Supposedly, he can just will his weapons to appear."

"That would explain why we couldn't find anything in his pockets," Zatanna groused.

"I've got some of Father's powers; maybe that will be enough." The purple-haired girl tentatively placed her hand on one of the aforementioned gauntlets. "Umm... I really need the scythe...?"

Nothing happened.

"Now!" she ordered, both verbally and mentally.

The familiar bladed weapon immediately popped into existence before promptly falling to the floor with a clatter.

"Oops," the young witch said, embarrassed, before retrieving the tool. "I really hope that I don't get grounded for this."

"I'll explain it to him when he wakes up," Kara promised.

Raven smiled briefly before frowning again. "But I still don't know how to find the people who need help."

Tim looked thoughtful. "I've got an idea. Mortis?" he called. The translucent horse appeared next to his owner. "Joe's asleep and nobody's dying anymore. Raven thinks she can help, but we don't know where he keeps the list of people to visit. Can you find them?"

The ghost stallion nodded his head.

"Great..." his step-sister said dryly, "except I don't know how to ride a horse."

"Wait a minute!" the redheaded stuntwoman interjected. "Hey, Silver, can you turn into a bike by yourself, or does the boss gotta be awake?"

In response, the Pooka transfigured itself into its black motorbike form.

Roxy smiled brightly. "Now that's what I'm talking about! Sweetie, I'll handle the transportation. You just figure out how to work that thing," she pledged while gesturing to the softly glowing scythe.

"Fine," Batman acknowledged as he swept back into the crowded medical bay. "I just spoke with Amanda Waller; Hamilton apparently went rogue with those shackles after she convinced the President to mothball them."

"Did she have any suggestions on how to open them?" Superman asked.

The Dark Knight shook his head. "There was no key or means of unlocking the shackles the dig site. We're on our own," he advised the group. "I will go with Diana and attempt to recover the key from its maker. Mr. Terrific, scramble everyone else to the major hotspots to maintain order while Raven... fills in for Mr. Black. Let's move, people."

"That's weird," Harry commented as he faded back into existence again. "Am I supposed to do that?"

"Someone was attempting to wake you up," his mother replied anxiously. "Are you alright?"

"I'm fine... Mum," he replied awkwardly before attempting to change the subject. "So, Sirius, you're saying that the Veil really is a portal to the Realm of the Dead?"

"A one-way portal for most of us," the former Wizarding convict affirmed, "but... yeah. I'd imagine it's nothing more than a door for you."

"So... you're not really dead, then?" Harry pressed.

"From what I've gathered, it's one of those 'points of view' things," the Black-by-birth explained. "My body never actually died, it's just... well, dead."

Harry nodded distractedly. "When I get back... would you like me to pull you back out of the Veil, then? You know, let you continue your life?"

His godfather considered the proposal. "Maybe someday," he allowed, "but the Wizarding World already has one Mr. Black to prank it. I'd just be redundant. Besides, it's nice up here. Plenty of stuff to do, loads of awkward first meetings to watch."

The other Mr. Black felt an eyebrow elevate. "Like what?" Harry asked.

Smiling far too brightly, Sirius pointed over his godson's shoulder.

Following the appendage, Harry caught sight of a swiftly approaching blonde woman. The aforementioned flaxen female looked suspiciously like a middle-aged Kara clothed in alien attire, and she apparently had her sights set firmly on Harry.

Recognition apparently dawned for both Blacks at the same time, as Padfoot snickered and gleefully exclaimed, "Looks like someone's in for the high jump!"

"Bugger!" Harry muttered before being smacked upside the head. "Oww!"

"Language," his mother calmly corrected.

"Hello, Diana," Hephaestus called out jovially as he quenched the glowing sword hot off the forge. "It's been... what? Two... three years now? How's things? And look, you brought company."

"We didn't come here to discuss old times," the Amazonian princess interrupted. "There's a set of ancient shackles bearing your mark that's currently binding your relative and halting all death on Earth."

"Ah, yes, Sisyphus's old toy," the smith acknowledged with a grin. "I had wondered where those had gotten off to."

Kara stepped around Diana's taller frame. "How do you open them?" the blonde girl demanded.

Hephaestus made a show of looking her up and down. "Cute kid," he said in an aside to Diana. "Spunky, too. Reminds me of the missus when she gets her dander up. I can see why he likes her," he explained. "It's not really all that complicated, Sweetness. You just need the key."

"And obtaining the key will entail... what, precisely?" Batman inquired. "I've learned that magic always has a price."

The Greek god of the forge nodded. "Wise man," he noted. "I'd hang onto this one, kiddo," Hephaestus advised the Amazon. "To answer your question, it's rather straightforward. You just have to reassemble the key and you're all set—kind of like that piece I made for the Tartarus gates. That reminds me, Diana. Did you really have to break that key to stop Hades? Do you have any idea how long it took me to make a replacement?"

"Where are the pieces?" Diana questioned tiredly, ignoring the smith's inquiry.

"Well, let's see." Hephaestus made a show of recalling a hazy memory. "There's a total of four pieces; three of which are hidden in sacred temples, and the fourth one is kept right here," he finished, fetching the key fragment from a chest. "It works a lot like how you found the Tartarus key," the god of the forge continued. "Carry this piece with you; the jewel in the handle glows brighter as you get closer to one of the other parts; assemble the four together... yada yada yada. Get the picture?"

"Thanks," the Amazon answered shortly. "If that's everything, we'll just be going."

"That's not quite everything," he informed the group as he put the finishing touches on the now-cooled ebony sword. "If you're determined to go on this little odyssey, you may as well do it right. Each of the temples is protected by elemental guardians. Now, Diana's equipment is more than sufficient—it's my work, after all," the smith stated with something less than complete modesty, "and Miss Wings here is okay, what with that magic-disrupting mace of hers, but the rest of you aren't really equipped for the trip. You girls check over there," he pointed Kara and Galatea over to another worktable. "You ought to find something a little more suitable than your bare fists."

The short man turned to his male guest. "And that brings us to the mortal Batman," Hephaestus stated unnecessarily. "Heard a lot about you," he admitted. "You're supposed to be pretty inventive; we'll have to talk after you finish this piece of business. Now, this little baby is for you," he stated, turned the black sword over to the Gothamite. The weapon was as black as night, and the hilt bore an embossed bat identical to the insignia across his chest.

"It goes with that," the god gestured to the finished suit of black armor, which looked similar to the partially metallic suit his Justice Lord counterpart wore. Hephaestus pitched his voice low and added, "Consider it an early wedding present." His tone once more normal, he finished, "It ought to help even the playing field with your friends here, powers wise. Considering all of those metahumans running around causing trouble these days, why you never built power armor is beyond me. Anyway, it should stack the odds in your favor."

The smith turned around and stomped back to his forge. Thrusting another ingot into the fire, he called out, "Now, if you'll kindly get a move on, I have orders to fill."

The ringing of a large hammer accompanied the five Leaguers' exit. After he heard their aircraft take off, Hephaestus put his hammer back down and turned to one corner of his shop with a grin. "What did I tell you?"

"Oh, don't act so smug," Hera chastised fondly as she became visible once more. "It's unbecoming. How Aphrodite puts up with you is a mystery—even to me."

The smith's grin widened. "Love is blind," he asserted with a shrug. "You know," he mused, "this has been rather fun. I need to have company over more often."

"I don't get it," Shayera admitted as the group hovered over a clear expanse of water. "First, the key leads us to that abandoned mountain temple that was nearly frozen shut—one of those Oracles you mentioned."

"Where we had to bash that enchanted armored suit while it did its best to freeze us," Kara added, before complaining, "I hate the cold."

"That was nothing compared to the next stop," Galatea interjected. "What would possess you Greeks to build a temple inside a volcano?"

"It was dedicated to Hephaestus," Diana supplied. "It makes sense that it be used to hide part of his spare key."

"Yeah, I can sorta see that," Kara allowed, "but now the thing has sent us to the middle of nowhere. What's the deal? Is the temple floating on the ocean invisibly or something?"

Batman, who had remained silent up to this point, finally contributed to the discussion. "No, not on the ocean—under it."

"You have got to be kidding!" Shayera complained.

Turning to the resident expert on Ancient Greece, he continued, "Diana, I recall a myth that mentioned Hephaestus was originally banished and was found by a woman named Thetis."

"Yes, the sea goddess," the Amazon agreed. "After Zeus threw Hephaestus from Mount Olympus when he was defending his mother Hera, Thetis found him crippled and lying on a beach. She took him to her undersea grotto and raised him with the help of Eurynome, the mother of the Graces."

"Well, it looks like we're going to be getting wet," Kara said resignedly.

Bruce retrieved the set of rebreathers from their compartment and passed them out to the Leaguers requiring them. "After you," he invited amusedly.

"I hate you," she asserted before sticking her tongue out at him. Pressing the door release, she dived out of the plane and into the ocean, the rest following directly behind her.

A/N: Sorry for the long delay in publishing this chapter. Hopefully, the 12,500-word length makes up for it.

I decided to split this chapter into two parts, so expect the second half to be posted soon. After that, I'll write the two-part conclusion and—possibly—the epilogue.

A couple omakes and suggestions were implemented in this chapter, namely [Shackled by Callide_Mori](#).

Many thanks to James and Chris for proofreading this chapter, and to all the [CaerAzkaban](#) group members whose suggestions appear in this update.

Thank you for your interest, and please remember to review.

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Chapter 16: Black Is Back by Overkill

Next Chapter

Disclaimer: This is a cross between JLA (Season 5) and Rorschach's Blot's Make A Wish Story. Harry Potter is owned by JK Rowling and various publishers. Henchgirl, The Professor, and other such objects are Rorschach's creation. DC Comics own the Justice League and associated characters/plot devices. The lack of plot, however, can be attributed to me.

Black Is Back

Clark looked up as the object of his vigil groaned and shifted. A quick glance showed that the recumbent Death Incarnate wasn't waking—he was apparently just suffering from another nightmare. Clearly, whatever compound Pamela Isley had used was simply insufficient as a long-term remedy.

Not that such a situation was all that much of a surprise.

Still, something needed to be done and soon. Seeing that the others had yet to return from the commissary, the Man of Steel picked up the zippo left lying on the table. Clark had closely watched both Tim and his adopted father, and had already learned how the item worked. Before he lost his nerve, the Kryptonian lit the fire and paused, suddenly unsure to whom he should address his call. Tim had mentioned that he had spoken with his and Raven's aunt, so...

"Mr. Black's sister?" Clark tentatively requested into the fire, half-expecting it not to work.

The flame flickered. For a few moments, nothing happened aside from the shade of green of the flames changing. He was about to admit his defeat when the flame flickered again.

"Yes?" a female voice queried before a second asked, "Who is it?"

Clark blinked at the extra participant. "Uh, I was trying to reach Mr. Black's sister?"

"Yep, that's us. You must have been redirected. I just knew that feature will prove itself useful sooner or later. So who is it?"

"Superman," he answered automatically, before immediately questioning himself if he should have given his alias to these unknown... beings. They didn't seem to care, though.

"Has something else happened?" one of the women asked anxiously. "Not that I don't like a good chat once in a while but, given the situation, I doubt this is a social call."

"Unfortunately, you are correct," the Kryptonian admitted. "Mr. Black is having, uh, nightmares again. It seems that the concoction Poisons... Pamela Isley used is wearing off."

"Of course it is. While floral-based compounds react faster than conventional substances, the dissolution factor..." One of the women launched into explanation.

"Is now really the best time for that?" the other female interrupted.

"You're right. I'm sending his enhanced Dreamless Sleep Potion. It should do a better job of keeping our brother sedated," the woman promised. "Be sure that no one else consumes the potion by mistake," she warned. "That formula should only be used on Mr. Black; anyone else will immediately slip into a coma and die. Well, they should die. No, wait. That didn't come out right, either. You know what I meant, right? Right."

Superman was only slightly surprised when a dark-colored bottle shot out of the Zippo's fire, but he managed to catch it all the same.

"Now that the immediate problem is solved—how is he?"

"No particular change. He's still unconscious," the Man of Steel dutifully reported.

"I knew we should have made a better example the last time someone tried a stunt like this!" one of the women fumed. "If we had just used your pest—or Cholera—this wouldn't have happened!"

Clark wisely assumed the comment was not directed at him and was immediately proven correct when the other female voice answered.

"The situation didn't seem quite as severe the first time, though I must admit that I'm beginning to see your point. Your little stomach disorders—no matter how memorable to the subjects—aren't really stuff that makes history."

"Little stomach disorders? I'll have you know that I'm far above things like 'little stomach disorders'—like making sure they can't even look at food for weeks. After all, if people don't suffer a little, how can they know when they stepped out of line?"

"Excuse me?" Clark questioned instinctively.

The woman suddenly became contrite. "Oh, sorry. Forgot you were there," the female voice admitted. "Just please give our brother our love when he wakes—and tell him to call us more often! Bye!"

The call disconnected and Clark found himself looking at the Zippo. Finally, he put it back on the table and carefully administered the strange 'Dreamless Sleep' substance.

Once his task was complete, the Man of Steel allowed his mind to replay his most recent conversation. Mr. Black's sisters seemed normal enough—if one used their brother as a frame of reference, of course. But there was something disturbing about them at the same time.

'Wait a minute!' Clark suddenly realized. 'Did she say her pest and Cholera? And didn't the other woman specialize in food...?'

"Any new developments?" the familiar voice of the resident Green Lantern asked as he strode into the room.

Clark bit back several sarcastic responses and greeted his friend. "Not really. Any word on how they're doing locating that last temple?"

"Should be soon. And it seems Raven managed to get at least the most dire cases under control."

"Good," Clark breathed a sigh of relief. "Things are finally starting to look up."

"You'd think so, but no such luck. That's why I came here, actually."

Kal El of Krypton sighed. "What is it now?"

"Tornados," John Stewart answered bluntly, "a bunch of them."

"Where?"

John snorted. "Everywhere. It's like someone expanded Tornado Alley while we weren't looking. Things aren't looking pretty."

The Man of Steel stiffened. "Kansas?" he asked worriedly.

"Almost all of it's blanketed," the Green Lantern admitted reluctantly. "There was one anomaly that might interest you, though. When Mr. Terrific accessed the satellite feed for that section, I saw a fair-sized area completely unscathed from the disaster afflicting the rest of the state. Incidentally, this twister-free zone is centered exactly around a farm owned by one Jonathan Kent."

Suddenly, the voice of Mr. Black's sister rang again in Clark's head. 'If they don't suffer a little...' It seems that the women took Hamilton's treachery personally. Which would mean...

"We need to alert the W.H.O.!" Clark exclaimed. "Now!"

Henchgirl sighed heavily as the Polluter's Repelling Potion turned a wrong color again. She emptied the cauldron and walked to the Doctor's room.

"I'm going crazy just waiting for news like this!" the inventor complained as she let herself into the other woman's room.

The mediwitch sighed. "I know, and I can't help thinking that they might be in over their heads. They seem to rely solely on Muggle technology, and they might miss something important if it's magical."

"And he is lying there all defenseless," Henchgirl lamented, "and we can't be there to protect him. We won't have a set of Transporting Mirrors ready to test for days yet!"

Doctor hummed to herself thoughtfully. "You know? Now that you mention it..."

"Yes?" the other witch perked up immediately. "You thought of something?"

"You and the Professor said that the new Port-Trans you designed becomes unstable when magical people are transported," Doctor mentioned. "What about magical creatures?"

The Potions' Mistress looked confused. "It should work fine in that case, but what good would that do?"

"Well... It may not be the best solution, but Harry at least needs some magical protection."

Henchgirl impatiently motioned for her colleague to continue.

"After all, she is pretty much domesticated nowadays, and Nuni's been missing him awfully. She's even lost her appetite. Besides, with all the powers that his new friends have, they shouldn't have a problem with one larger-than-average cat, right? And that will buy us some time to find a way to get him more help."

The Potion Mistress looked at the other woman for a long moment before grinning. "Doctor, you're brilliant!" she finally exclaimed.

Amanda Waller strode purposefully into Emil Hamilton's lab and found the renegade scientist at his desk, laboring over what seemed to be a genetic sequencer and thoroughly ignoring his visitor. However, he did not ignore the envelope she dropped in front of him. Surprised, he opened it and removed an illustration of a dinosaur.

"Can you tell me what that is?" she asked upon his confused look.

"A dinosaur by the looks of it... definitely a Theropod. Allosaurus, if I'm not mistaken," the man identified, "from the late Jurassic period."

"Very good. Now, do you know why you can't meet beasts like that anymore?"

"They died out," Hamilton replied, stating the obvious.

"Everyone knows that much, but do you know the reason why they're dead?" Waller pressed.

The goatee'd man shrugged. "There are a few working theories."

"Watch," the short woman instructed before inserting a disc into his computer. "This is surveillance footage I obtained from the Justice League hanger surveillance system."

Hamilton watched the short exchange in the orbiting docking bay between Black and a couple of League members.

"Did you think about the possible consequences of your actions?" Waller demanded. "The dinosaurs didn't, but at least they had walnut-sized brains as an excuse. Seen the news recently, Emil?"

"That just proves he is even more dangerous than we ever thought—more so than Superman could ever be!"

"Forget Superman!" Waller spat. "And forget the rest of the Justice League while you're at it! We are talking about a being who, if he took offense—and, quite frankly, I don't see how he could not take offense—could very well hold the whole humanity accountable."

"In which case, the fact that I took steps to neutralize him—"

"Could easily mean that you've singlehandedly damned all of mankind!" she interrupted. "Once he is freed—and make no mistake, he will get free—Black is going to want a very good explanation for all of this. So does the President, for that matter, and he's ordered me to make sure that we have one. Langley is very curious as to why you unilaterally declared war on the Pale Rider when he was willing to let matters remain as they were."

Her phone rang. "Excuse me." Amanda walked away from Hamilton's desk as she listened to the person on the other side of the phone. She was visibly paler when she finished the call.

"Oh. Did I mention that Mr. Black's family is getting involved now?"

"Did you get it?" Superman asked the disembarked Leaguers once he confirmed that they were all unharmed.

"Right here," Kara replied tiredly while waving an assembled key-shaped artifact. "How is he?" she asked, the pronoun not requiring further explanation.

"Better now," the Kryptonian admitted. "He was burning through Miss Isley's sedative at a phenomenal rate, but the new... potion... that his sisters sent over has thankfully kept him asleep since then."

"Still having nightmares, then?" Galatea asked guiltily.

"Oh, yeah," John Stewart answered. "Between Zatanna and Doctor Fate, they've managed to protect most of the med lab. As for the rest..." He waved a hand at the damaged quarters that seemed to have withstood both exceptional heat and cold. The Green Lantern looked at Batman askance. "New suit?" he asked.

"Don't ask," the Dark Knight—a now even more apt description, given the armored additions—replied. "How's the situation on the ground?" he asked as the group headed towards the medical wing.

"Not good, and worsening every minute," Clark answered. "Raven's doing the best she can, but the volume's just too much. I sure hope this works."

"We all do," Diana assured as they entered the clinic and found the two magicians John mentioned ready to renew the shield around the single occupied bed if necessary.

Seeing Kara leading the group with the presumed key in her grasp, Pamela Isley breathed a sigh of relief. "Thank goodness!" she exclaimed. "I was running out of variations of tranquilizer. He's gained immunity to most of them already, and I don't know how much longer this new stuff his sisters sent over will last."

"Well, everyone cross your fingers," the blonde girl replied as she slid the magical object into the restraints. Turning the jeweled artifact, the group held their collective breath for an instant—only to release it again as the bindings snapped open with a barely audible click.

"Why isn't he awake?" Kara asked a few moments later, when Harry was still unresponsive. "Shouldn't he be up, since they instantly put him to sleep before?"

"Listen, I've had to hit him with enough sedative to render everyone else on this station comatose for a year," the Queen of Green replied a trifle testily. "It's going to take a few minutes for him to recover, and even then he might be... not himself."

Kara frowned upon hearing the redhead's comment. "What do you mean, 'not himself'?" she demanded. "Why would he be different?"

"Hey, Blondie, why'd you think?" the redheaded horticulturist demanded irritably. "Mr. Black's biology is different from any other living thing I've ever seen. His responses to stimuli are completely unpredictable. He even had me attempt to green him once as an experiment, and the only thing that did was soothe his nerves. That's it! I should have had him enthralled for a decade, and I couldn't even compel him out of his chair! And besides all that, I had to resort to using some... let's say... heavily regulated compounds to keep him asleep. So, I don't know if there will be side effects, or what they will be. He might wake up and be perfectly fine, or he might jump out of bed singing show tunes. I just don't know," she finished tiredly. "I'm sorry."

"I'm sorry, too," the Argosian apologized. "I'm just worried."

Pamela Isley smiled briefly. "I know, but the only thing left to do now is to wait."

Ever the detective, Batman latched onto her brief hesitation. "Exactly how heavily regulated are these substances?" he demanded.

The plant elemental consciously ignored her one-time adversary in favor of keeping watch on her patient.

"Well, if it's gonna be a few minutes, I'm going to make sure that these can never be used again," the blonde asserted, grabbing both the shackles and the key. "I figure throwing them into the sun should do it." She then disappeared in a blue and red blur.

Moments after her departure, a male figure strongly resembling the still-unconscious Mr. Black appeared out of nowhere and gracelessly planted his face in the hospital ward's floor.

"Oww..." the newly-arrived brunette muttered. "That's gonna leave a mark."

Immediately following his proclamation, a blonde girl appeared in the very same spot and, as a result of the first still-prone arrival, lost her balance and fell on top of her companion.

"Way to go, Dawnie," a muffled voice congratulated sarcastically. "Very of the smooth. Now, would you please get off my kidney?" he grumbled.

The flaxen female hopped off her landing pad. "It's your own fault," she replied. "You're the one who was in a hurry to escape the Matrimonial Marauders."

"Hey!" the man protested. "You were the one who blabbed to the girls that I proposed to Ahn! This is all your fault!"

After a furious exchange of glances nominated him as the spokesman for the group, Superman stepped forward. "Excuse me but... who are you?"

Slowly climbing to his feet, the other man said, "I'm the one and only Xander—" he trailed off as he took in his surroundings "—Harris." Turning to the girl at his side, he asked, "You know something, Dawn? When my darling older brother told us about his new friends living on a space station, he could have bothered to mention that they were the Justice League."

"Cool!" the new female arrival stated excitedly. "So, why is Uncle Black here again?" she asked.

"If I had to guess," Xander hypothesized, "I'd go with saving the universe, enjoying free enterprise... you know the drill."

Waving to the bewildered costumed crowd, Xander announced. "Hello, everyone. As I said, my name's Xander. This is Dawn Summers. I hear that my older brother's had a bit of an accident. You might know him: average height, wears a black robe, good with agricultural equipment, kinda on the thin side. He might've introduced himself as Mr. Black...?"

A few of the League wordlessly pointed at the single occupied bed.

"Right then," the brown-haired male nodded. "Hey, I thought he was chained up or something?"

"Err...we managed to get the shackles off," the Man of Steel offered, "but we had to sedate him earlier and Mr. Black's still asleep."

"Thanks a lot, Big Guy," Xander replied as he began setting out various potions. "Hey, I'm gonna need a cauldron or something."

Dawn rolled her eyes. "Do I have to do everything?" she protested before digging a shrunken vessel out of her pants' pocket. "How's that?"

"Perfect," came the reply as several ingredients were thrown into the vat, including Pepper Up Potion, a bag of blood, and a bottle of Firewhiskey.

"What's all that for?" she asked curiously, having recognized a few of the ingredients.

Xander smiled. "Revenge. The last time he caught me asleep, the jerk stole all my classic Hawaiian shirts and gave them to that blasted Nundu of his for bedding. And, when I told the girls, they applauded!"

"Xander, they weren't alone. Most of us wanted to nominate Mr. Black for sainthood—again," the youngest Summers girl answered bluntly.

"Whatever," he dismissed. "Ladle?" She handed over the scoop and he soon transferred a spoonful of the concoction to the reposed magician. "You all might want to move back," Xander warned the costumed people hovering around the bed.

As soon as they complied, Harry jerked up to a sitting position as gouts of flame shot out from his ears and mouth.

"What did you do?" an upset female's voice demanded. Without waiting for an answer, the just-arrived Supergirl zipped over and grabbed the apparent assailant by his throat. "Tell me!"

"Uh... Kara...?" the Argosian's clone sister spoke up hesitantly.

"Not now!" the blonde girl growled.

"Kara," an amused male voice instantly caught her attention, "why are you strangling my brother?"

The original Argosian blinked. "Brother?" she repeated before releasing her prey, speeding over to the bed, and proceeding to asphyxiate the newly awoken wizard with a super powered hug.

"Well, this is good," Zatanna noted in a relieved tone from the other side of the room. "He appears to be perfectly fine."

"I had my doubts," Batman admitted, "but Black's faith in you seems to be well placed. Well done, Pamela."

While the Queen of Green preened, Kara was still inspecting the recently reanimated wizard. "You're alive!"

Harry looked over himself. "Apparently so," he agreed readily.

"But you were dead!" she protested.

The wizard shrugged half-heartedly. "I got better."

"How do you feel?" Kara asked anxiously as she studied the reposed magician.

He grinned. "With my hands, usually."

"Cute," she replied in like kind. "Seriously, is everything working properly?"

"Let's find out," the wizard replied before casting several spells whilst perform an acrobatic routine. "Yep," he finally decided after running up a wall and back flipping to land in a sitting position next to Kara, "everything checks out a-okay."

"Great!" she breathed a sigh of relief. "The universe has gone nuts while you were sleeping, and every planet we've checked is becoming increasingly covered with zombies. We need your help."

"Hmm," Harry deliberated. "I think I'll pass. Thanks, though," he finally decided.

"What?" Kara voiced the sudden inquiry from most of the room's occupants. "Can you repeat that?"

"I'm not really in the mood to go rid all creation of Inferi," he explained brightly.

"Maybe I spoke too soon," Zatanna muttered as Batman glared at the former plant-themed villainess, batarang in hand.

The Girl of Steel looked confused. "Umm... I'm not sure if you know what's going on, but people have stopped dying. Everywhere."

"I know," the wizard admitted casually. "I can feel them. Heck, I can even hear several of them."

"But... aren't you supposed to stop stuff like this from happening?"

Harry shrugged unconcernedly. "Probably, but you know what I just realized? I've spent my entire existence fighting all the things that go bump in the night so that everyone else can live their happy little lives. You know what I've gotten for my troubles?" he suddenly demanded. "I've been insulted, slandered, ignored, hated, shunned, and feared. I've been called 'Freak' and 'Monster' and—on a few special occasions—'Abomination'. I very rarely get thanked, though, so I've decided that I don't want to do it anymore," he announced, suddenly calm once more.

The blonde woman seemed only partially surprised, unlike most of their audience. "Well, what do you want to do?" she asked.

The black-coated magician's smile widened. "Well, it starts with you, me, an empty stretch of beach, and very little clothing," he elaborated.

"I'd like that," the female metahuman admitted while inwardly cursing her luck. All those plans she laid with precision, and they couldn't come to fruition a day or two prior! "But first... I'd really appreciate it if you could fix things first," the blonde continued suggestively.

She leaned forward and whispered something in the magician's ear—while her Kansas-raised cousin on the other side of the room made a show of ignoring the proceedings in favor of staring out the observation window.

"Really...?" Harry questioned curiously. "The green one, with the little...?"

Kara's smile was more than a little impish as she nodded in reply.

"Right," he said as he jumped off the bed, "save the universe and then celebrate. This requires transportation." He put two fingers to his mouth and whistled shrilly. "Hey, Mortis! We've got a job to do!"

In response to his summons, the magical motorbike reappeared in the medical bay, along with its two passengers. Raising an eyebrow at the scene of his daughter holding his scythe in one hand with her other arm wrapped around Roxy Rocket, Harry huffed in amusement. "I'm sure there's an absolutely fascinating story here that I'll really want to hear later, but I need my bike back. Now."

Raven hopped off the vehicle and immediately began to ramble off an apology whilst simultaneously attempting to return the scythe.

Harry finally silenced the girl's anxious commentary by the simple expedient of hugging her. "It's alright, Raven. You did the right thing, and I'm very proud of you. I'm just sorry that you got caught up in all this."

"Well... we're family, right?" she asked.

The wizard nodded sharply. "We are," he agreed before vaulting onto Mortis and silently querying Death's ring for the most efficient solution to the problem. "You all take care. I'll be back before you know it."

The next thing he knew, a certifiable female was situating herself on the motorbike behind him.

Harry turned his head and asked, "What do you think you're doing, Kara?"

"What's it look like, Bonehead? You don't need to be out and about on your own right now, so I'm going with you," she replied immediately.

"Err... I'm pretty sure that I'm supposed to do this sort of thing solo," he stated. "Why am I taking you along again?"

Kara leaned forward and whispered in his ear.

Harry blinked surprisedly before grinning. "Ah, yes. Now I remember," he replied. "I guess it's just as well. My mum's been pestering me to bring you for a visit anyway, and your mum wants to talk about your penchant for flying around in a miniskirt. Toodles, all. Oh, and Dawn? Keep an eye on Xander. We don't want a repeat of last time"

Xander's protests of innocence were drowned out when the wizard dumped the clutch. The bike launched itself forward with a roar, disappearing from sight just before colliding with the far wall as the pair began their rounds.

"I believe it safe to say that Mr. Black did indeed have a reaction to your concoction, Miss Isley," Dr. Fate noted.

"Ya think?" Shayera demanded incredulously. "I saw it, and I still can't believe it. I mean, the fate of the universe... traded off for a superpowered booty call?"

"It does make sense from a certain point of view," the sorcerer professed. "As a force of Order, Mr. Black must be in balance. If we assume that those binds unsettle the equilibrium between Life and Death by diverting the ambient Death energies into his own form—thereby creating the suspended state of animation—then it stands to reason that Mr. Black must also bolster his Life energy to compensate. Historically, this transfer can be facilitated via the transfer of blood or by a certain set of rituals of a... private nature."

"The blood requirement does support some of our observations," Diana allowed. "Batman and I witnessed a very strange reaction at the genetic level when foreign sources of blood were introduced."

Despite the obstructing mask, Dr. Fate's expression still somehow conveyed his interest. "Truly?" Directing his attention to the lounging

Xander, the magician asked, "Are you allowed to confirm or deny this supposition?"

Meanwhile, Xander struggled to suppress the sudden onslaught of maniacal laughter. While he had often witnessed the aftereffects of these wildly inaccurate tangents regarding Harry, never before had he observed the proceedings firsthand. Manfully forcing his expression to remain neutral, the demon hunter calmly stated, "That sounds like a theory."

Hurriedly changing the topic before he could crack, Xander approached the youngest people in the room and introduced himself again. "And you two must be Raven and Tim, the newest adopted members of our little family. How're you doing, kids?"

"Bout like you'd expect," Tim announced. "Watching the universe fall to pieces while being stuck here unable to help."

The latest male dimensional traveler nodded. "Yeah, the sideline does majorly suck, doesn't it?" He thought for a moment. "Want to accompany me on a little errand?"

"Like what?" the Hunter scion inquired.

"Like paying a little visit to the ones responsible for this mess, of course," Xander replied offhandedly. "Speaking of which... who is responsible?"

"Dr. Emil Hamilton," Galatea answered dejectedly.

The brightly-dressed young man looked thoughtful. "Hamilton, huh? Let's see... If you don't mind my asking, Power Girl, is your birth name Kara Zor-L or Galatea?"

"Power Girl?" Galatea echoed confusedly.

"Oops," he apologized sheepishly, "you haven't picked a codename yet, have you?"

"Umm... no, I haven't. And my name's Galatea, by the way, or just Tea."

"Gotcha. So... that would make this Hamilton the chief genetics scientist for 'Project: Cadmus' and formerly from S.T.A.R. Labs, then?" he half-asked, half-stated.

"He used to be," Clark spoke up. "Cadmus was dismantled shortly after a... misunderstanding of intent."

The Hawaiian shirt-wearing man nodded. "Right, right. The Ultimen clone army. I remember this dimension's particulars now."

"Wait a second," Dawn objected. "I remember this one now, too." Turning to her companion, the girl asked, "Shouldn't she be... well, you know?"

Xander shrugged. "My brother moves in mysterious ways," he unconcernedly offered while looking at their surroundings yet again. "By the way," the man remarked whilst brandishing a Black Hole, "have any of you seen a rather large and frequently irritable Nundu running around? It appears that the girls have misplaced my brother's housecat."

"Bye, Pete, catch you next time!" Kara called as Harry started the motorbike again. Jumping back on the passenger seat, the blonde metahuman scooted up next to her boyfriend. "He wasn't exactly what I had in mind when I thought of a gatekeeper," she confided. "I guess I was expecting someone a little more... saintly."

"You've got to admire the man's collection of bar jokes, though," Harry maintained.

Kara nodded. "True. Ah well, that's the last of the stranded souls from the entire universe. So, what's next?"

"Now we face the music," the wizard supplied as he once more shifted them between dimensions.

'One of the few good things of my last little adventure,' Harry thought ruefully to himself. 'Thanks to that ruddy remote, I finally got a feel for temporal and dimensional Apparation.'

"You mean it?" she asked disbelievingly. "I can actually... see them?"

Harry shrugged as the bike slipped into the void. "Well, you have been nice enough to help me sort out this mess. By the way, I'm sorry for what I said to you earlier. I... wasn't myself."

Kara purposely stretched against him. "Pity," she teased, "I've been trying to get your attention for weeks now. I thought I'd finally come up with the perfect plan when we were on the beach, but we got interrupted... again! I mean, Clark may like to drag out a courtship for decades, but I want to do more than just hold hands at the occasional family dinner before I'm forty!"

Her verbal parry earned a response, as Harry looked over his shoulder with a confused expression. After all, he had been under the impression that things were going well between them.

"More? Like what?" he asked.

The extraterrestrial just gave him a look. "You know."

"'You know' what?" Lara In Ze demanded, demonstrating once again that the maternal ability to catch their children's missteps was not limited solely to humankind.

"Oh, look," Harry observed with artificial surprise in his voice. "We're here."

Kara smiled dangerously at him. "This isn't over," the young woman promised even as she was dragged into an emotion-filled family reunion.

"Are you sure you're up to going in with us?" Xander asked once Galatea led the group to a guarded research center. "I mean, he's probably still got that remote of his with him."

The blonde woman was silent for a few moments. "I know what to watch out for now. This is my mess; I'll clean it up."

"Alright, then," he accepted, "let's go introduce ourselves to the nice guards over there."

A few moments later, the party let themselves into the facility, and Galatea led Xander, Dawn, Tim, and Raven to Hamilton's lab—and

promptly jumped aside as two paramedics rushed a heavily bandaged human male out of the room and towards the express lift.

"Hey, Waller," the clone tossed out casually when she identified the room's sole other occupant. "Where's the doc?"

"You just missed him," the shorter woman replied, "though apparently Black didn't."

"What?" the artificial Argosian demanded. "What do you mean?"

"Apparently, the good doctor was attempting to recreate... well, let's just say that you were going to have another sister, shall we?"

"But why?"

Waller shrugged. "From the interrogation I just put him through, he apparently thought that the League had compromised you somehow. After his confession, I left the room to phone the President. While I was gone, Emil apparently began the initial stages of creating the embryo when he suffered an... accident."

"Did anyone else hear the added emphasis?" Xander asked jokingly. "'Cause I sure did."

"And who are you?" the dark-skinned woman demanded, immediately shifting topics.

Xander considered the question for a brief moment before smiling brightly. "You may call me Nighthawk, or Mr. Blue," he replied. "I'm Mr. Black's younger and far more charming brother. This is—"

"Key," Dawn interrupted, "and Mr. Black's my uncle. Now, I'm getting the impression that you don't think Hamilton's accident was entirely by chance."

"I think that it's a blatant case of Assault and Battery—except that there's not a single shred of proof. Within minutes of Project Longshadow's demise and Mr. Black's recorded promise to 'take care of the situation', all forty seven of Cadmus's covert biological archives were simultaneously destroyed under mysterious circumstances. All research was irreversibly lost, and all genetic material in the library was rendered completely unsalvageable. Now,

after attempting to resynthesize Galatea's biological data and forcing her to attack Mr. Black, Hamilton conveniently suffers an 'accident'. The coincidence is positively staggering."

"But there's no proof of any foul play, right?" Dawn asked, more than familiar with the signs of a 'Black Attack'. If she was attentive with this latest incident, she might even win this month's contest amongst Mr. Black's agents for the most unusual incident. "Would you please describe the... accident."

"Shortly after the television networks reported that the affected people were starting to die—which I assume to mean that the League somehow freed Mr. Black—Hamilton's desk chair broke, sending him falling to the metal floor. In the process, his leg became wrapped around the computer terminal's power cable. When his glass of water was knocked off the desk, he suffered a severe electrocution. The surveillance recordings then show him climbing to his feet with the assistance of a full-height industrial-strength paper shredder. Somehow, the shredder activated and caught Hamilton's necktie, delivering severe blunt force trauma to the front of his head. Emil managed to free himself, only to slip on the floor, hit his head against the desk, and electrocute himself again."

Smiling brightly at the assured win, the girl asked, "Is that all?"

"Then the entire fifteen hundred pound computer bank tipped over on top of him, putting Hamilton in traction," Waller added.

The demon-fighting duo looked at each other. "That sounds about right to me," Xander allowed.

"Certainly seems like he's been here," Dawn admitted. "I guess that covers everything. Uncle Black's back on the job, this jerk was beat within an inch of his life, and I've got a shot at winning this month's jackpot for the strangest Black Attack. I guess we're done here."

"Not quite," Xander corrected. "There's still the matter of exactly how Hamilton's little toy turned Tea here into Mind Control Girl. What's the what, Waller?"

After the short Department Head translated the speech, she hesitated before briefing the small group on Galatea's implanted neural inhibitor. Needless to say, the group was less than pleased to

learn of the nefarious device's existence. The news hit the cloned Argosian particularly hard, as she had considered the apparently unbalanced scientist to be a father figure.

"And Tickle Me Emil set this lead-shielded thing so that any tampering releases Kryptonite directly into her brain?" Xander demanded.

"The President wishes to clarify that Dr. Hamilton's actions were completely unauthorized. The United States government had no awareness of this unsanctioned operation."

Xander snorted. "And you expect us to believe that a guy who's probably not stepped foot out of a science lab in thirty years just happened to stumble across those shackles all by himself? Pull the other one, why don't you?"

Giving Waller a knowing look, Xander turned to the downcast blonde. "Don't worry about it, Tea. As soon as my brother's done saving the universe, we'll have him look at you. He's good at stuff like this."

Before he could further reassure the woman, the group was interrupted by the sudden, panicked arrival of the two paramedics from earlier.

"Run for your lives!" one of the medics yelled as they ran further away from the building's entrance. "There's a monster, man-eating cat on the loose!"

The two Sunnydale residents looked at one another. "So that's where Nuni ran off to. Later, Waller," Dawn called before leading the group towards the exit. "We'd better go catch my uncle's cat."

After finally separating the Nundu from the even further battered Emil Hamilton—who seemed to make an adequate cat toy judging from Nuni's sulking—the group returned to the Watchtower to await Harry's and Kara's return. This occasion occurred sooner than they expected and was heralded by the unnaturally loud exhaust of an approaching motorbike. They tracked the source and found the pair exchanging teasing barbs from atop the two-wheeled conveyance.

"Hi, Uncle Black!" Dawn greeted, succeeding in interrupting the sickening display.

Harry smiled as he and Kara dismounted. "Hello, Dawn. Xander. What brings you here?"

"You, actually," she admitted. "We got word that the universe was falling apart while you took a nap, so we decided to drop by and look in on things."

"That's very kind of you," he replied. "So... what are we dealing with here?"

Xander and Dawn filled in the new arrivals on the latest developments.

"So..." Harry paused, "Hamilton's in a full body cast, you say?"

Xander nodded. "Quite possibly. Any particular reason for your interest?" he asked amusedly.

Poorly concealing his own smile upon learning the misfortune of the man who had abused Galatea's trust, the wizard shook his head. "No reason," Harry replied, "no reason at all. Now, tell me more about this mind control chip thing."

They proceeded to do just that, and Harry soon had the entire story behind his friend's neural inhibitor.

"Right then," the magician announced once they were finished, "that's gonna have to come out... right now. Take a seat over here, Tea, and let's have a look at you."

When she did so, the wizard squatted down in front of her. "I need you to stay very still, understand? Can you do that for me?"

Her blue eyes clearly showing both grief and fear, the extraterrestrial clone nodded hesitantly.

"Good girl," Harry reassured her with a smile. Once he located the lead-plated capsule with Mage Sight, the wizard slowly phased one hand inside the blonde woman's head and carefully froze the device before phasing and removing it in one smooth movement.

"There," Harry said with a note of finality, "all done! How're you feeling?"

Galatea considered the question. "I've got a major brain freeze going, but I'll be fine." She bit her lip as she stared at him, almost as if she didn't know how to act around him.

Demonstrating an insight that—quite frankly—took him completely by surprise, Harry understood the white stocking-clad woman's hesitation. With a small, resigned sigh, the wizard held his arms outstretched and his impromptu patient wasted no time in embracing him fiercely while babbling desperate apologies and incoherent explanations.

Awkwardly, Harry patted her back. "I understand, Tea. You weren't yourself, and I don't blame you for what happened. Now, Hamilton on the other hand..."

"Oh, I think he's learned his lesson," Xander asserted. "Now, since Tea's out of the woods, we really need to talk."

"Now?" Harry and Kara asked in stereo, and for the same reason.

The other man nodded.

"Alright then, Xander. Let's borrow that room over there," the wizard conceded before turning his attention to the rest of the group. "Sorry, Kara. Tea. Kids. This shouldn't take long."

Apparently, the blonde's displeasure at the men's departure was rather obvious, as she was interrupted mid-sulk by her new acquaintance.

"Sorry about that," Dawn said. "Xander's not exactly the most socially adjusted male out there."

The Argosian just grumbled.

"I'm just saying that you shouldn't let him prevent you from making the most of things... like, say, listening in on their conversation," the Sunnydale resident continued brightly.

Kara looked at the other female contemplatively. "And how do you propose to do that? Joe's got this bad habit of doing something that interferes with eavesdropping."

"With this," Dawn pledged as she brandished a strange looking radio. "A couple goofballs I know made these." At the group's confused look, she elaborated, "I bugged Xander when he wasn't looking."

Both blondes smiled. "Should I ask why?" Supergirl questioned.

Dawn huffed. "The last time those two went on a vacation together, they were gone over six centuries! And they left me behind!" Her mood noticeably brightened when Xander's voice came through the radio.

"Shh... they're starting," the girl cautioned needlessly. "Gather 'round, Cousins."

"Wait a minute, Batman," Diana called out in an annoyed tone. "Did you see what I did with that folder I was holding a few hours ago?"

"You laid it down in Conference Room Six—where we were discussing Monitor Duty rotations before Mr. Black's... indisposition," the World's Greatest Detective immediately replied. "Why?"

"It was some research I was doing for Mother—modern legal procedures and whatnot. You go ahead; I'll catch up in a few moments."

Gotham's original vigilante tilted his cowled head curiously as he followed the woman back the way they came. "Dare I ask why?"

"It was something that Mr. Black got her thinking about after our little scuffle on Themyscira," the Amazon's Princess replied. "After consulting with the gods, Mother is considering opening an embassy in Man's World."

"Really?" he asked amusedly.

Diana nodded. "I know," she agreed. "I mean, I thought that she would nev—"

Batman motioned for silence, and then pointed towards the opened door to their destination.

Wonder Woman rolled her eyes at her significant other's security obsession—but obediently fell silent so as to eaves... observe their new guest as she talked with Supergirl, Galatea and the two magical teenagers that Black adopted.

"So, what have you been up to?" Xander asked once they were alone.

Harry shrugged. "A little of this, a little of that. Nothing major."

"Your costumed friends out there are singing a different tune," his brother disagreed. "While you and Kara were off saving the universe—good job on that, by the way—I was brought up to speed on all kinds of interesting gossip that you somehow forgot to mention when you called home. Like your little Halloween bash with Morgana and Etrigan... Gabriel."

"Oh, shut up," Harry muttered.

"Hark! The Harold angel sings—" Xander began singing before his brother Banished him into the wall.

"Like you did any better with your costume this year, Michael?" the green-eyed wizard inquired mockingly.

"Hey, dressing up as Death Incarnate, the Left Hand of God, and a deity forty-something times over is a pretty hard act to follow," Xander protested as he righted himself. "I mean, I couldn't dress as you two years in a row, now could I?"

"Whatever," the other magician dismissed. "You said we needed to talk?" he prompted.

The Sunnydale native turned immortal wizard nodded in agreement. "Oh, yeah. I wanted to tell you that your Nundu is waiting for you outside of Gotham."

Harry blinked. "Okay... and why is Nuni in Gotham of all places?"

"Well..." the other man hesitated, "She was getting restless on the island, so the girls thought that she could hang out with you here. So Tea, the kids and I finally corralled it into your room up here."

The wizard nodded. "I'm with you so far."

"Right, well, the thing is, none of us knew that you had a portal set up between your dorm room here and the club in San Francisco. Nuni found it, though, and went exploring. Then, apparently, she stumbled across Harley's pet hyenas and got into a... well, let's call it a territorial dispute."

Harry sighed. "How bad is it?"

"Nothing that some spackling won't fix," Xander assured the anxious owner of both Nundu and club. "And some lumber, a few truckloads of bricks, a couple mixer trucks worth of concrete, lumber... hey, you don't happen to know a good plumber, do you?"

The elder magician rested his head resolutely on the table. "And Nuni?"

"Oh, she's fine. Pamela recommended her friend Selina as a cat-sitter, so we coaxed Nuni through another portal and left her there."

Harry jerked his head aloft. "You left Nuni with strangers? What if she gets lonely, or sick?"

"I'm sure that Catwoman will be just fine," Xander assured the worried wizard. "She's got a lot of experience with rare feline breeds, after all."

"Catwoman?" Harry crinkled his nose in confusion. "I was talking about Nuni. You remembered to leave her favorite toys, right?"

Xander just shook his head. "Nundu toys, right. Listen, that brings us to the next topic, namely... when are you coming home?" he demanded desperately. "I've been trying to cover your job and mine, but it's just too much. Just this week, I've had to authorize the construction of three annexes for the Architect, evaluate seventeen projects for the twins and the Acme girls, settle a dispute between the Yuki-onna and the Veela on the proper temperature of the indoor swimming pool—"

"We have an indoor swimming pool?" Harry interrupted curiously.

The other man nodded. "That was the Architect's project last week. Anyway, since the kid is due soon, the Pencil's been stressing out even more than usual—and it somehow became my job to talk some sense into him! Then, there's the usual mess with the acquisitions for the library, approving the field expenditures for the various agents you've assigned all over the place. Oh, yeah, and I have forty seven written requests for dispute mediation waiting for you when you return to the Island."

Harry just stared at the other man gasping upon reaching the end of the list. "Take a deep breath, Xander," he advised amusedly.

"How do you do it?" the other man demanded. "Every time I turn around, there's ten people needing me to sign something, or oversee a project, or stomp on some new wannabe dark lord's neck... I'm fixing to loose my mind!"

The emerald-eyed wizard smiled. "Too late," he confided.

Xander just glared before matching his brother's mischievous expression. "Oh, I also wanted to congratulate your superior handling of this whole situation."

"Err... thanks?" Harry offered.

"I mean, your little coup in Gotham was a stroke of genius, what with Harley Quinn finally getting the help she needs and the Joker confined to a wheelchair—"

Harry raised a hand. "Actually, Joker's dead," he corrected. "He was apparently trying to assemble one of his joy buzzers earlier today and grounded out his metal wheelchair. Chasing down an insane, paralyzed, and electrified clown zombie wasn't pretty."

"Better you than me," Xander replied smugly, "but I just love the irony. With them out of action, Barbara Gordon's never going to receive that paralyzing gunshot wound that would have otherwise irreversibly ruined her life. Not to mention the horror that Tim Drake would have incurred at the clown's hands—or what would have happened when the Joker learned who Batman was under the mask.

Very impressive, coming from someone who's sworn off the hero thing."

Harry looked at Xander oddly. "I have no idea what you're talking about."

Xander found it equally strange that his brother had never read the comics nor seen the shows based on his new friends. "Sure you don't," he agreed disbelievingly. "I mean, if you had, you'd have gone for the hat trick and given Alfred a few extra years of life or something."

The emerald-eyed magician cleared his throat and looked off to the side.

"I see..." Xander acknowledged. "You know, I couldn't help but notice that there was a certain amount of chemistry between a particular Dark Knight and a Princess out there."

Mr. Black nodded. "Yes, I'm rather happy for the both of them."

"And you had nothing to do with that, I'm sure," Xander prompted.

His brother shrugged. "He had some concerns, and I addressed them. Everything else has been all them. Why do you ask?"

"Oh, no reason. I was just thinking of some of the possible ramifications of a relationship between the two of them. Like, I don't know, the Bat restraining some of Wonder Woman's more... impetuous tendencies, and Diana repaying him by proving through example that not all metahumans deserve around-the-clock surveillance. I don't suppose you managed any heart-to-hearts with Zatanna, did you?" he asked the apparent non sequitur. "Maybe regarding when to use mental magics like Legilimency and Obliviation?"

"It might've come up," Harry admitted easily.

Xander smiled. "Very clever!" he praised. "With Diana working on his metahuman hang-ups and Zatanna not going all Mindwipe Girl on the Bat, there won't be any strain to break up the League! And that means no Brother Eye and OMACs! Without them, Diana's reputation will never be destroyed and the Amazons will never be

invaded and destroyed." The Sunnydale inhabitant laughed. "You singlehandedly averted the entire Identity Crisis—years before it could ever erupt! Over a million people spared from all that pain—and they'll never even know they were in danger."

The eldest living Potter leaned back his chair and propped his feet up on the table. Shaking his head at his brother's ramblings, Harry said, "I'm sure you realize that I haven't the faintest clue what you're going on about."

"Right..." Xander drawled disbelievingly, "and I'm sure that it was a coincidence that you adopted Raven before Trigon could possess her body and soul, warping her into an evil, mind mojoing puppet?"

Now extremely intrigued by where Xander was getting his information—he had been rather careful when reporting the details regarding the "minor demon" that was Raven's original biological father—Harry raised an objection. "Raven's a strong girl; I'm sure that she would have fought against such a thing if she had to."

"Oh, you know that she would have," Xander agreed. "She fought very hard—not that it ultimately did any good. Trigon is an Old One, after all, so there was much badness all around. By the way, I can't imagine that the antlered wonder's too happy with you stealing away his future puppet. Any idea where he's at?"

Harry smiled smugly. "Brother mine, I know exactly where he is at this very moment."

"You don't seem very worried."

Lips turning upwards, he simply replied, "I'm not. He had a bit of an... accident."

"Riiight... So, have you done anything with his stuff yet?" Xander asked. "He did reign over more than a few dimensions, after all. I mean, with the sudden power vacuum, things are bound to be a little... hectic."

Harry frowned. "Bugger! I knew I was forgetting something!" He shrugged. "Ah, well. I'll get around to looking it over one of these days."

"Sure thing... anyway, I can't help but notice the same story with our young Mr. Hunter," the Sunnydale resident continued, "what with that downward spiral into dark magic he was heading for. It's a good thing that you just happened to bump into him and provide an alternative to him running away from home."

Harry nodded. "I was happy to help."

Xander snorted. "And you're telling me that it was sheer coincidence that you managed to catch two youths with that much potential, both of whom were destined to be ignored by the local mystic community?"

The elder wizard chuckled. "Why, Xander, are you suggesting that I somehow miraculously arranged all of this? Subtly nudging dozens of people away from their poor choices and so forth years in advance? I mean, you make this little vacation of mine sound so... premeditated... when you explain it that way."

"It does, doesn't it?" Xander agreed before changing the subject back to the two adopted teenagers. "It's going to take a lot of effort to keep that pair on the straight and narrow, you know," he warned. "The other side's got queues waiting to subvert those kids."

The green-eyed wizard shrugged. "If anyone gets the stones to come after either of them, I'll simply kill the gits responsible. Besides, since when has anything worthwhile ever been easy for us?"

Xander just stared at his sibling for a few moments. "Good point. So... business as usual, then?"

"Admit nothing, deny everything," Harry agreed.

"You know, if it's your goal to solve all the League's problems before they develop, you might want to work out the kinks in the Atom's personal life," Xander eventually mentioned as their little conference concluded. "His wife's not too happy with him at the moment and will go completely nuts in a few years after their divorce."

"We've talked," the other wizard confided. "He decided that his work was consuming too much of his time and vowed to pay more attention to Jean and less to his lab. Problem solved."

Xander just shook his head. "You know," he deliberated, "I'm beginning to think that you really are omniscient. All hail the invincible Mr. Black, instrument of Divine Punishment and Defender of the Just."

"Oh, shut up," Harry muttered before striding to the sole exit. He was stopped, however, by his brother's next inquiry.

"There's just one thing I don't get," Xander called.

"Oh? What's that?"

"What's the deal with you and Kara? I mean, she's not exactly your type."

Harry looked at the room's other occupant intently. "Meaning?"

"Well..." Xander began. "She's nice. And polite. And believes that every life is sacred—I'm not completely sure that she even can kill someone. On the other hand, you're... well, you."

The British wizard sighed. "I'd be lying if I said I haven't asked myself the same question." He suddenly huffed in amusement. "Oddly enough, my... job... doesn't seem to bother her at all. Her mother either, for that matter." Harry considered his last statement for a moment. "Do you think it's an Argosian thing?"

"In Lara In Ze's case, I think it's more a 'Dear God, my baby girl's dating Death! What am I going to do?' sort of thing," Xander theorized. "Now Kara, on the other hand... I'm drawing a blank, especially since I'm here now. You know that the hot, superpowered girls just can't keep their hands off me."

Harry snorted. "That's usually because they're trying to kill you in as drawn out and painful a manner as possible."

"What's your point?"

Harry shook his head before noticing one of the Weasley twin's products stuck to the back of his brother's coat. Removing it for him, the wizard commented, "By the way, be sure that Dawn gets her toy back when you're done with it, would you?"

Exiting the room, Harry's forward progress was again halted as he came face to face with a not-so-patiently waiting Kara. "Hello," he greeted the young woman—who ignored him in favor of glaring at Xander and tapping her foot imperiously.

"Done now?" she demanded archly.

Xander looked between the unlikely pair and smirked at her possessiveness. "Yep, all yours."

"Good," the Argosian answered sharply. "If the universe self-destructs again before tomorrow... get somebody else to take care of it," she ordered before snatching Harry and zipping back to his warded room at super speed. Oddly enough, their exit velocity seemed to knock Xander off his feet as they vanished from the room.

Dawn eyed the other Sunnydale resident as he climbed back to his feet. "I so saw that coming."

"Well, at least we know why Mr. Black stayed around after defeating Trigon," Diana offered after the pair of League founders dodged Black's visiting family, "but I don't understand most of their references. What happens... would have happened to us in the future, Bruce? Do you think this 'Brother Eye' is some sort of warlord in the future?"

Caught up in his own ponderings, the Dark Knight missed the slip in proper address. "I can only extrapolate from their conversation, Diana," Batman admitted.

His omitted response to the latter part of her query sparked her curiosity. "Which doesn't exclude you from having a theory," the Amazon pressed.

Deciding against an outright lie, the World's Greatest Detective attempted to dismiss the issue. "It's merely a security concept, Diana," he answered, "nothing to get worried about."

Her suspicions building, Wonder Woman crossed her arms. "What sort of security concept?" she demanded.

"Waller's people did have a few solid ideas," Batman dodged the query again. "Left unchecked, a small group of metahumans could

create all sorts of catastrophes. Someone needs to keep an eye on things."

"So you immediately began brainstorming a way of monitoring every metahuman in... what? the United States? North America? The whole planet?" she asked incredulously.

Bruce looked off to the side. "I warned you that I had issues," he stated gruffly.

"Which we will be discussing later tonight—at length," the shapely warrior pledged. "Meanwhile, the others should be told of all that we just learned."

Her boyfriend stared at her blankly.

"Okay," she finally admitted, "maybe not all of it." Withdrawing to the private chamber reserved for the original seven League members, the pair brought their colleagues up-to-date with their latest findings.

No sooner had the others accepted the latest in a long line of sensational news regarding the mysterious cosmic force that is Mr. Black—including the report that the dinosaur extinction 65 million years ago was due to their being poor neighbors—then the group's deliberations were interrupted. The sudden and unexpected red alert blared in every corner of the space station—except, of course, a certain warded dormitory whose two occupants were presently unconcerned about such things.

As the founding members of the Justice League jumped out of their seats, Mr. Terrific's voice emanated from the public address system. "All League members and personnel, this is an Alpha level alert! There are unidentified, armed intruders on the Bridge! I repeat, there are unidentified, armed intruders on the Bridge!"

Flash was out the door before the others were even on their feet. Superman picked up Batman and immediately sped towards the central control room as Green Lantern, Hawkgirl and Diana following as best they could. Moments later, the founding members had joined the rest of the on-call superheroes arrayed in a rough circle around—of all things—two tall skeletons in black robes. Each fleshless intruder casually gripped a scythe in their bony hands, and somehow bore sheepish expressions on their skulls.

The menacing figure on the left, whose robes seemed to have a blood red inner lining, shook his head in annoyance and turned to his compatriot. "Dat was a fine way ta introduce yourself! 'Cower, brief mortals' indeed!"

While the first skeleton demonstrated a Jamaican accent to his otherwise normal voice, his companion possessed a deep, cavernous tone that echoed through the bones of everyone present. "IT WAS SIMPLY A FORCE OF HABIT. I DO NOT ASSOCIATE WITH MORTALS AS MUCH AS YOU DO OUTSIDE OF WORKING HOURS."

A red blur zipped through the crowd of heroes and skidded to a stop in front of the two intruders. "Hey, are you guys looking for Mr. Black?" Flash asked in his typical abrupt manner.

"Let me do de talking," the Jamaican skeleton muttered to his colleague, then stepped forward. "As a matter of fact, we are. Unfortunately, we're having a bit of trouble locating him."

Superman lowered Batman in front of the forbidding pair before landing beside the Gotham-based vigilante. "Perhaps some introductions are in order?" he prompted politely even as he positioned himself between the two talking skeletons and the majority of the League members.

The chattier of the two intruders smacked himself in the skull. "Of course! How rude of us. I am de Grim Reaper, but you can just call me 'Grim'. My colleague here is Death, but he goes by de name 'Bill' when dere's more dan one of us deaths around."

Most of the collected heroes started muttering amongst themselves nervously—especially given the recent Death service outage—but Batman's eyes narrowed. "What is the difference between a grim reaper and the personification of death?"

"THERE ISN'T A DIFFERENCE, REALLY," the second figure replied. "WE CHOOSE TO GO BY DIFFERENT NAMES, BUT OUR ROLES ARE ESSENTIALLY THE SAME; TO HARVEST THE SOULS OF THE NEWLY DEAD AND GUIDE THEM TO THEIR PROPER DESTINATION."

The Dark Knight wasn't satisfied. "Why are there two of you?"

Grim fielded that question. "I am de current reaper for Earth in de dimension dat Mr. Black hails from, while Bill here is de 'Death' of a discworld, which rests on de backs of four gigantic elephants, who in turn stand upon de shell of de Great A'Tuin, de star turtle."

"So each world has its own 'Death'?" Batman pressed in an attempt to understand the political structure of the Underworld.

"USUALLY, THOUGH SOMETIMES THERE ARE MORE THAN ONE," the Discworld Death explained. "I, FOR EXAMPLE, AM ASSISTED BY DEATH OF RATS, WHO HARVESTS THE SOULS OF VERMIN AND VERMIN-LIKE INDIVIDUALS."

Superman grinned as images of a wailing Lex Luthor fleeing from a tiny scythe-wielding rat skeleton, popped into his head.

Sparing a moment to glare at the quietly snickering Man of Steel, Bruce Wayne turned back to the two skeletons. "And where does Black fit into this?"

"He's a Death, too," Grim explained, "and my boss. He's been on vacation for a while now 'doh, and since he's been overseeing t'ings in dis universe as a favor, we decided to come pick him up for de Union meeting—in case he hasn't gotten de notice yet."

Hawkgirl frowned in confusion. "Wait a minute. If Mr. Black's actually in charge of another universe, why didn't you just ask the Death of this universe to check up on him?"

"That's a good question, Shayera." Everyone, save the two talking skeletons, jumped as an attractive goth girl dressed in black clothes and wearing a silver Ankh just appeared next to the grim pair.

Grim chuckled nervously. "Well, de t'ing is dat Madame Mort here is a bit higher ranking dan either of us, and it would be a bit rude to ask her to do a simple errand like this."

Batman's eyes narrowed further. "What is Mr. Black's exact rank?"

Superman jumped in, shooting the Dark Knight a warning glance. "If you don't mind us asking, that is."

The new female Death tapped her chin with a black-nailed finger in thought. "Well... let me put it this way. Grim and Bill are the Deaths of their respective worlds. On the other hand, I am the Death of this entire universe—it's my job to close everything up when the universe ends—so the rest of the Deaths in this dimension report to me. Mr. Black's my corollary in his universe, and Grim's his second in command on that Earth. Joe was nice enough to take over for me here while I attended the Union meeting for this dimensional sector."

"Umm... excuse me, Miss... err... Death?" Flash hesitantly hailed the Goth's attention.

She grinned amusedly. "You can call me 'DeeDee' if it's any easier for you," the Anthropomorphic Personification offered.

"Thanks... err... DeeDee. I was just wondering... Are you and Mr. Black related? 'Cause there's a definite resemblance."

Death smiled impishly. "There is, isn't there?" she agreed. "I suppose you could say that we're cousins—sort of."

"So," Grim changed the subject, "the Boss is still here, then?"

"Yeah," Galatea spoke up, "he's in his room but he's—" Grim disappeared without warning "—got company. Well, this can't end well," she finished bemusedly.

The cloned Argosian's prophecy was validated only moments later as a green-edged portal appeared in midair—an instant before several bones and tattered pieces of black cloth were ejected. The deluge continued until Grim's protesting skull bounced to a rest next to his disassembled body. Finally, his scythe was thrown through the mystical opening before the portal winked out of existence.

"You alright there, Grim?" the female Death asked amusedly.

"I'll be fine, Lady Teleute," the scattered skeleton promised, "but de Boss is in trouble. Der's a she-demon in dere attacking him. Dey're wrestling on the floor and, when I tried to get 'er off, she hacked me apart with me own scythe while yelling for me to come back tomorrow! I t'ink she's also mind controlling de Boss, since he created de portal ta toss me back here."

Trying—and failing—to conceal a smile, the female Death replied, "Joe's a big boy. I'm sure he can handle this... battle... by himself."

"BUT IF MR. BLACK IS BEING ATTACKED, IT IS OUR RESPONSIBILITY TO ASSIST HIM," Bill insisted.

She smiled. "Trust me, Joe wouldn't appreciate your going back in there to... err... save him. Just leave a note on his door or something; I'm sure he'll get it eventually. In the meanwhile, I think we should welcome Joe's daughter—and our newest coworker—into the fold."

"De boss has a child?" Grim exclaimed. "I didn't know dat!"

"My name is Raven," the young witch introduced herself before pointing to the even more youthful wizard, "and this is my... stepbrother, Tim."

Grim somehow managed to rotate his skull so that it faced the two youthful magicians. "A pleasure to meet you, Miss Black. Mr. Black... err... Junior."

"GREETINGS, RAVEN AND TIM BLACK," Bill offered. "ARE YOU ALSO A DEATH, TIM?"

"Umm... I don't think so," the Hunter scion stated unsurely.

"Well, you boys can help Grim pull himself together. Raven and I have girl stuff to talk about," Teleute informed her colleagues.

The purple-haired girl looked at the other gothic woman appraisingly. "We do?" she asked.

"We do," Teleute nodded firmly. "I'm sure that you have questions that you'd like to ask—I know that I do. Not the least of which is why Hades left a large gift basket on my doorstep, along with a card begging me to never leave your dad in charge again."

A/N: As promised, here's the 8,400-word followup to The Great Blackout.

Look out for the two-part conclusion and—possibly—the epilogue to be posted soon.

A few omakes and suggestions were implemented in this chapter, namely Death Convention by Ben Sheahan, the tornado/Nuni addition by Luinlothana, and By Dawn's Early Light by Chris Hill.

Many thanks to Chris for proofreading this chapter, and to all the CaerAzkaban group members whose suggestions appear in this update.

Thank you for your interest, and please remember to review.

Previous Chapter
Terminal Justice

Chapter 16: Black Is Back
by Overkill

Next Chapter

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Chapter 17: Cry havoc...

by Overkill

Next Chapter

Disclaimer: This is a cross between JLA (Season 5) and Rorschach's Blot's Make A Wish Story. Harry Potter is owned by JK Rowling and various publishers. Henchgirl, The Professor, and other such objects are Rorschach's creation. DC Comics own the Justice League and associated characters/plot devices. The lack of plot, however, can be attributed to me.

Cry Havoc...

Harry groaned into the tabletop's smooth surface which currently supported his head.

'I am never coming to Vegas again! Never! Not in a million years!' he vowed to himself, before absently casting a climate control charm in response to the rapidly rising temperature in the crowded hotel room. 'Probably should cut out the late night pints as well,' he added, 'and I'm pretty sure the coffee wasn't helping, either.'

A certain blonde Argosian's irate voice cut through the heavy silence. "And just why are you so happy about all of this?" Kara accused.

Wearily raising his head, the frustrated wizard eyed the pair of nearly identical, disheveled metahumans silently. The elder of the blonde pair—who wore a plain bathrobe and clutched two smoking wedding certificates in a tightly clenched fist—was almost literally glaring red-hot daggers at her larger and chronologically younger sibling. Similarly attired, the other fair-haired extraterrestrial possessed a faint smile as she studied the plain gold wedding band on her ring finger.

Galatea shrugged, her eyes looking at anything but the other two people in the room. "Let's face facts," she said bluntly. "It really isn't that farfetched of an idea that we'd have the same taste in guys, now is it? It's not my fault that Joe's one-of-a-kind." She glanced down at her ring again, idly running a thumb over the simple piece of jewelry. "And I kind of wanted to stay with you guys anyway. You know, really become a part of the Black and Kent families...

Marriage might be a weird and extreme way to go about it but... hey, I'll take what I can get."

The anger slipped from Kara's face. "Tea..."

The mood was ruined when the door to the Honeymoon Suite came crashing into the room, its ballistic entry heralding the arrival of two unexpected individuals. The first person—and the apparent cause of the door's sudden relocation—was a woman in an ill-fitting but authentic-looking Batman suit. The Dark Lady was followed closely by Wonder Woman—who was poorly hiding her amusement of the entire escapade.

Cutting to the point as quickly as the male version, 'Batwoman' practically shrieked with rage. "BLACK, WHAT THE HELL HAVE YOU DONE TO NEVADA!"

Harry blinked before his head slumped back onto the table with a solid thud. 'I am never drinking beer and coffee together ever again. I am never drinking beer and coffee together ever again. I am—'

The strange scene suddenly dissolved away, inexplicably replaced by a curious Kara shaking his shoulder. "Joe? Are you alright?"

The wizard sluggishly nodded as he regained his senses.

"Why aren't you ever drinking coffee and alcohol again?" she inquired. "Did you have a nightmare or something?"

Harry's breath suddenly caught in his throat as his eyes jumped nervously to his unadorned ring finger. Thinking quickly, the magician hastily agreed. "Err... yes... a nightmare! That's it exactly!"

Kara smiled mischievously and moved closer. "I know just the thing to banish those nasty nightmares," she informed him in a husky tone.

"Err... it's getting kinda late, and we really should make sure that everyone's alright," he inserted, the remnants of his dream still in the forefront of his mind. "Not to mention finding out what Grim needed last night."

The young blonde woman moved behind him and began rubbing his shoulders. "Are you sure that you have to leave already?" she whispered into his ear.

Harry suddenly stilled. "On the other hand, Grim's immortal. I'm sure he won't mind waiting a while longer."

Emil Hamilton had no sooner regained consciousness on a rather uncomfortable hospital bed when he noticed Amanda Waller sitting on a chair next to him. His attempt to question her presence failed, however, and he was soon reminded of the exact reason why he was on said bed.

"Ah, Emil, so you're finally awake. Just out of curiosity, do you still believe that you made the right decision?" the squat department head asked sarcastically, only to be answered by a look of confusion. "You do remember what happened, don't you?" she pressed.

"Blick," he managed with no small effort.

Waller nodded. "Yes, he organized that initial little misfortune of yours. You might consider yourself lucky that he seemed content with giving you a... slap on the wrist, shall we say, rather than killing you outright. On the other hand, ending your rather ignoble life would spare you from the rest of his family expressing their disapproval of your actions." She huffed in sardonic amusement. "I guess it's debatable rather you're lucky or not."

"Lcky? Hw?"

"Let's just say that you owe your life to Superman. If it weren't for him alerting W.H.O.—who in turn alerted all the various hospitals—they would have never caught the problem before it was too late. Not to mention that everyone visiting you would be at risk of getting infected as well."

Struggling to focus, the genetic research scientist finally recognized his visitor's strange dress as protective clothing used in biologically-hazardous areas.

The woman continued. "As it is, you're something of a curiosity for the epidemiologists. Apparently, Mr. Black's sister dosed you with a strain of bacteria that's been long considered extinct."

"Sstr?"

"Why, yes, his sister. One of his three siblings, to be precise. History sometimes refers to their little family as the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse. After all, Emil, where else would you suddenly acquire a disease not seen for ages?"

"Bt... Th tgr... nh... pnthr..."

Waller smiled, though no real humor was present. "Ah, so you do remember the cat. I'm afraid that whatever the creature was, it was neither a tiger nor a panther. For what it's worth, Black apparently considers it a housecat."

"Bick?"

"From what I understood, when his brother came looking for you—no doubt to chastise you directly—his sister Pestilence decided to get a bit more creative. She apparently sent the 'kitty' to you with a little care package. According to the doctors who put you back together, you probably won't be able to eat any solid foods for months to come."

After that blunt and unfeeling prediction, Hamilton somehow paled further.

"Brthr?"

"War, who apparently refers to himself as Mr. Blue. He seemed to wish for a word with you about the situation but, after witnessing his siblings' handiwork, apparently decided to just collect the cat and forget the direct approach."

Before the exhausted man could materialize some visible form of relief, Waller spoke again.

"He decided on a more subtle method of vengeance instead."

"Anthr?"

"Yes. You see, just a few minutes after our conversation, we got a word that an armed conflict broke out on the Kasnian border. It was

quickly subdued but not before engulfing—and completely destroying—the industrial base of the most important private sponsor of your research. Additionally, your federal funds have been withdrawn; it's been a tight fiscal year, and your recent actions brought your budget to the forefront when it came to cutting costs. I'm afraid that if you want to do any research after you recover, you'll have to pay for it out of your own pocket. You've become too much of a liability for the United States government to continue sponsoring you."

Waller rose to her feet. "Other than that, get well soon," she stated in a slightly less sincere tone than normal, "and don't say that I didn't warn you, Emil."

Turning around, the Director of the Department of Metahuman Affairs calmly left the man to his many regrets and even more numerous ailments.

Oddly enough, a similar sentiment was shared by many inhabitants of a certain cloaked base in the African wilderness, including a purple-haired sorceress named Tala. After enduring an hour of power outages, medium-grade tremors, and a multitude of explosions, the witch gave in to the inevitable and forewent her meditations. Instead, she elbowed her way past the overly curious gang of super villains and barged into the epicenter of the disasters.

"Lex, stop it!" she shouted to the room's sole occupant over the din. "You will blow us all to pieces!"

Looking over his shoulder, the bald criminal sneered at the unwelcome interruption. "Not now, Woman! Something's happening!" True to his words, the latest experiment suddenly began to hum before inexplicably illuminating itself. "It's—"

The light and sound reached a critical crescendo as the lab equipment exploded spectacularly in the wake of yet another failure.

"It's... just one more steaming flop!" Luthor cursed, throwing down his goggles in disgust and pounding on the console in front of him.

After watching the grown man throw yet another tantrum, Tala attempted to calm down the criminal genius. "Lex, forget about bringing back Brainiac—"

"I don't need input from some crystal-gazing parasite!" he snarled, turning his fury on the sorceress. "One who's confused a wench's grip on power with the real thing!"

Tala backed up against the demolished specimen analyzer and snatched Brainiac's remains from the rubble. Holding it in front of her in indictment of the unbalanced billionaire, she protested, "This is the real problem between us. It's pure wild goose chase! Look, I will prove it. I will show you what is in there."

"Don't be stupid!" Lex resisted disdainfully. "This is science! What good is your sorcery... unless you plan to turn stone into gold... or maybe a frog?"

"Such ignorance! Transmutation is what you want to do!"

Mocking the accented magician, Lex parroted, "'Transmutation is...". He suddenly stopped as another possibility occurred to him. "What are you waiting for?" the man suddenly demanded. "Do it!"

"Okay!" Tala cried out indignantly, snatching the stone from his grasp. Centering herself, the witch attempted to link her consciousness with that of the artifact in her grasp. "By the slaughter of innocent, by pestilence and plague, reveal the hidden unto me."

Several seconds passed in silence.

"There, you see?" Tala asked in a vindicated tone. "It's just a rock, a worthless piece of—oh!"

"What?" the impatiently-waiting genius demanded.

"It's... not important."

"Show me!"

The witch complied, sharing with him the scene where Brainiac was destroyed in the Apokolips star system. The embedded memory continued until the space base was destroyed, severing Tala's connection to the artifact and returning the two villains to the waking world.

Ignoring Tala's pained collapse to the floor, Lex began walking back towards his work table. "There's still Brainiac in the universe!" he exulted happily.

"There is no way to tell where it happened," the woman stated.

"Wrong! I saw enough of those stars to determine the coordinates. It should be a simple matter—"

"You saw the wild goose again!" the woman interrupted, disheartened in his behavior. "Concentrate on us, Baby! Space is too far. Together, we can rule this world."

Lex turned around and shoved her to the floor. "If you like this world so much, keep your fool mouth shut—and maybe I'll let you keep it. Me, I'm going to be a god again!"

"You know," Harry murmured some time later as he stared up at the ceiling, "I didn't think it would turn out like this."

Kara raised herself on one arm and looked at the wizard curiously. "Oh, I don't know. I think that things turned out just fine." She considered her response for a moment before amending, "Very fine."

The wizard coughed uncomfortably. "Yes, well, I was referring more to your lot's reaction when you found out about... well, you know."

The Argosian snorted. "It wasn't exactly a big secret before, Joe. After all the times you've bailed the League out both on and off the clock... well, somebody'd have to be a complete idiot not to notice how different you are."

Harry smiled listlessly. "You can go ahead and say 'freak'," he allowed. "It's nothing that I haven't heard before."

"I didn't mean it like that, you big dummy!" the blonde woman protested. "You've got at least one impossible job—which just so happens to be one of the coolest, most important gigs I can think of—and you still find time to help others. Sure, a few rules have gotten bent along the way—and you've got most people convinced that you're either hyperactive, mentally unbalanced, or both—but

you always come through in the end. Personally, I think it's kinda sweet that the universe has a big brother like you to watch over it."

The wizard stared at the female bewilderedly. "You're taking this loads better than I was expecting, given Clark's distaste for the supernatural."

Kara ran her free hand along her side suggestively. "In case you missed it earlier, I'm not Clark. Personally, I think all this magic stuff is one of the coolest things ever, and I really appreciate all the lessons that you gave Tea and me. They saved my life, you know, mine and the others."

"What do you mean?"

"While you were... resting," Kara explained delicately, "we had to go on a quest to retrieve a key to unlock your shackles. And, of course, what expedition for a magical artifact would be complete without magical death traps?"

Harry instinctively studied the young woman's form, as if to discover some heretofore hidden wound. "Are you and the others alright?"

The out-of-costume Supergirl patted his shoulder reassuringly. "We're all fine. It was touch and go at times, but we pulled through thanks to what you taught us."

"I'm glad to hear that," the wizard responded, before his thoughts shifted to her last comment. "What happened?"

"Well, each of the stops we took had different protections—like the volcano temple that was guarded by this giant humanoid creature made out of pure fire."

The wizard eyed the young woman carefully. "Sounds... interesting," he offered.

"It was definitely that," she agreed wholeheartedly. "The thing is... Bruce, Diana, and Shayera just saw it as some magically-created creature and attacked it like they would any sentient living thing. Needless to say, the hothead wasn't fazed even a little bit. So then I thought to myself, 'What would Joe do?'"

He raised an eyebrow curiously. "Oh?"

The Argosian nodded. "Yeah, but I couldn't find a coffee shop anywhere, so I skipped that step."

Harry glared mildly at the blonde.

"Anyway, Tea and I took a good look at the thing—just like how you said when you covered magical protections on Avalon—and we noticed a definite pattern in its behavior," Kara confided proudly. "After it attacked a few times, we figured out that it was triggered by our proximity to the key's fragment... and that it had a fixed region that it could guard. Once we knew that, it was simple to find the ward anchor thingy and break it into little bits."

Her companion smiled. "Well done! I'm impressed."

Kara smiled somewhat wryly. "Yeah, well... it was nothing special. There was one good thing that came out of that mission, though, aside from the obvious."

"Oh? What's that?"

"I think I finally understood where you've been coming from all along," the Maid of Might admitted. "You've been nothing but considerate and supportive the entire time, and I've tried to be understanding, but there was always this little piece of me that felt... inadequate, I guess you could say."

Harry frowned in concern. "But... why?"

She shrugged. "Well, you could happily spend the whole day discussing the proper way to turn a frog into a dustpan with Zatanna, or teaching Tim the best ways to shield himself from debris or whatever... but as far as I was concerned, magic was just that—magic. I suppose that I shared Clark's viewpoint a bit, that it was illogical and undependable, but... when Tea and I figured out how to beat that fire golem thingy, everything just... clicked. It's definitely not scientific, but magic really does have a certain kind of logic to it, doesn't it?"

"Yeah, more or less," Harry agreed easily.

"I think I finally understand why you get a little cranky when people just gape when you do even the simple things," she continued. "It would be like asking anyone else how they managed to tie their shoes or dress themselves in the morning."

The wizard nodded his agreement before adding, "For the record, though, I don't get... cranky."

"Oh, of course not!" she breathed out patronizingly. "You just brood a lot. And get prickly if some disaster drags you out of bed prematurely. And—"

Harry rolled his eyes. "Oh, shut it," he interrupted.

Kara rolled over so that she straddled the reclined magician. Smiling impishly, she verbalized a reply.

"Make me."

The available senior members of the Justice League stared at each other silently from the seclusion of their private conference room.

"Well, at least we finally know why Mr. Black dropped by for a visit," Wally noted, breaking the silence that had settled over the group. "He was just filling in for the super hottie Death babe."

"Hardly," Batman rejected derisively. "That is only the official explanation, which has done an admirable job of covering Black's true agenda."

Clark looked at his friend in confusion. "What do you mean? What 'true agenda'?"

"The real reason that Mr. Black approached the League," Diana supplied, "was to prevent a sequence of events that would have destroyed us—along with a good percentage of the Earth."

"Allegedly," the Wayne scion immediately added.

The Amazon princess looked at the cowed man at her side. "Do you really think that he was lying? Or mistaken? He's gone to an awful lot of trouble for a simple deception, and what would he have to gain anyway?"

"You want to try repeating that in English?" Shayera asked sarcastically.

"Mr. Black and his... brother... possess some precognitive ability," the Dark Knight explained, "as most likely do his 'sisters' and his 'niece'. Using this foreknowledge, they were able to predict both how we would react to certain catalysts and the various resulting reactions."

"Which were apparently dire enough for Mr. Black to intervene directly," Diana supplemented. "Apparently, he has been subtly voiding one of our possible futures by changing the circumstances that led us down that road."

The Flash shook his head. "But why all the cloak and dagger stuff?" he wondered aloud. "Why not just drop by, tell us what was about to go wrong, then go back to his mansion in the clouds or wherever?"

Clark considered the query. "Aside from the fact that we probably wouldn't have believed him?" he finally suggested. "Mr. Black told Ma Kent that there were rules that prevent him from revealing himself to us, or to interfere with our lives. When Pa was about to have a fatal heart attack, though, he broke the rules and saved him. Or, at least, he bent them something fierce."

"As with Alfred," Bruce gruffly admitted.

"He told us something similar on Halloween," Shayera admitted. "In our presence, Mr. Black purposely redirected a conversation until this other guy finally asked why the Angels didn't intervene more from day to day. Once he was asked, however, Mr. Black was able to answer without any problems. They apparently can't just volunteer information but, when Black was asked directly, he admitted that a few beings still try to help 'under the radar'."

"But if Mr. Black can cross that line once, why can't he do it again and just tell us what's going on?" Wally persisted.

"Think about it," the resident Green Lantern chastised. "Mankind—and the rest of the universe—is right smack dab in the middle of a cosmic game of tug-of-war. You know, light and dark, order and chaos, angels and demons, good and evil. As long as neither side

drastically upsets the stalemate, then everything goes on like it always has. But if Mr. Black started indiscriminately helping us..."

Wally finally nodded in comprehension. "Then the other side starts pulling and the rope gets snapped or thrown in the mud. Bummer." The Fastest Man Alive considered the situation for a few milliseconds before asking, "But isn't that what he's been doing anyway? You know, giving advice, killing bad guys—that sort of thing?"

Batman smirked in reluctant admiration. "Not exactly. If his conduct here was reviewed, all you would find is a long list of convenient accidents or dumb strokes of luck for us."

Shayera voiced her agreement with the Gotham detective's conclusions. "He's stretched the rules a bit, granted, but he hasn't technically broken the non-interference policy." The Thanagarian smiled. "After all, he's hardly to blame if we happen to overhear a privileged conversation or two. Besides, by giving each of us only part of the solution, he can truthfully say that he didn't forewarn us of anything."

"And, for the stuff that we didn't pick up on by ourselves, in walks the helpful metahuman Mr. Black," Wally West realized.

"Who never really came out and told us who and what he was, but always seems to be in exactly the right place at exactly the right time to say or do exactly the right thing," John Stewart finished.

Shayera snorted. "At least we know why Black's always so happy. He's routinely stretched every rule they have, gone and done pretty much whatever he wanted... and there's not a thing that the other side can do about it."

"No, Dawn! You're too young to be getting into adventures!" Xander protested resolutely. "Do you know how much trouble I'd be in when we get back if I let something happen to you here?"

Dawn pouted. It was just so unfair. She finally found a world where superheroes existed, where she could finally step out of Buffy's shadow... and she gets stonewalled by Xander. Such an affront simply could not go unaddressed.

"Xannnder," she whined, "I'm several billion years old. I'm not a kid anymore."

Harry sighed. He was already rushing around trying to make up for the late start to his day—and that was before he found the invitation to some sort of Death council meeting stuck to his door that morning. That was not to say, of course, that the deviation from his originally intended schedule wasn't entertaining. Especially when Kara... He mentally shook himself before entering the verbal arena. "Dawn, you're still an adolescent," he countered calmly.

"Pleeeeeeasse?" she begged.

"You're still not up on your spells, Dawn—and you're too young!" sputtered Xander. "God, Buffy will kill me if anything happens to you! I may be immortal, but nobody's that immortal."

Dawn pouted. "It's not like I just ran off or something!" she protested. "I left a note for Mom. Besides, if I didn't hurry, I just knew that you'd find some way to leave me behind again—just like the last time you 'went away on business.' And do you remember how long you were gone then?" the blonde girl demanded irately.

"Six centuries," Harry and Xander duly chorused in unison.

"Six centuries!" she spat. "Six centuries of having fun, going on adventures, scaring entire planets full of bad guys... I want to do that, too, and I'm older than either of you were when you started to do the whole 'trounce the bad guys' bit." Dawn grinned at the two of them as she made her—to her mind, at least—unassailable point.

Harry and Xander looked at each other resignedly as they each contemplated their options. It seemed to be a choice between enduring several dozen hours of the girl's whining about double standards, or give in to her demands.

Xander grumbled and pulled out his Zippo. "Henchgirl, are you there?"

After about a minute, the call was answered. "Henchgirl speaking."

"It's Xander," he replied. "I need some special clothes for Dawn... a full protection suit and assorted equipment. How soon can you get it to me?"

Henchgirl was silent for a moment. "It'll just take a few moments. I have some extra stuff here, and I have an idea for her. I'll send the stuff through in a minute."

Inexplicably feeling his biological age, Harry just stared resignedly at the young girl who was now cheering and bouncing around the room. "There," the immortal wizard offered, "as long as you wear the suit, you can go on small adventures."

True to her word, the inventive Potions' Mistress soon returned to the Floo. "Alright, here comes the standard Lovely Angels gear, and I've enrolled Dawn as an apprentice for a future trouble consultant team."

Before either of the two males present could reply, Dawn had already grabbed the package and rushed out of the room, cackling all the while.

"We got it," Xander mournfully confirmed. "We'll call you back later. So," he attempted to change the subject, "where's your better half?"

"Off on a relief mission to some backwater planet," Harry supplied. "Apparently, the Justice League is also a non-profit courier service."

"Huh, go figure," the other man noted. "I guess that means that you're free to help keep an eye on the Dawnmeister, right?"

Shaking his head smugly, Harry Apparated away as Xander resigned himself to the inevitable mess.

"Are you sure that those go in together?" Tim Hunter asked as his half-sister Raven tossed another two ingredients into the simmering cauldron.

"Of course," the gothic teen said shortly, "Most Potente Potions clearly states that the Oblivious Unction requires both Fluxweed and Hellebore added at this stage."

"Yeah," the wizard-in-training agreed as he skimmed through the instructions again, "but it says to add the Fluxweed and then the Hellebore – not both of them at once."

"It will be fine," Raven said as levelly as she could.

"Why are you making this Unction stuff, anyway? What does it do?"

"It's just for practice, so it doesn't matter," she replied abruptly, her tone warning against continuing the conversation.

"Oh, Raaaven!" Beast Boy's boisterous voice called out from the other side of her bedroom door, providing the girl with a handy distraction. "Have you seen your brother anywhere? We were gonna hit the town, but I can't find him."

"I'm in here," Tim answered back before opening the door for the other teen.

"Whoa!" the green-skinned poster boy for Attention Deficit Disorder exclaimed as he took another bite out of a pizza slice. "Whatcha doin'?"

"Working," Raven supplied bluntly, "now go away."

Ducking around Tim, the Teen Titan stared down into the bubbling cauldron. "Dude! Is this like a magic potion or something?"

"Step away–now!" Raven growled.

Beast Boy waved his hands frantically. "Okay! Okay! Just chill! I'm not going to—" the partially eaten slice of cheese pizza flew out of his gloved hand and landed in the mixture with a plop.

"Hehehe," the shape shifter chuckled weakly as the room's owner leveled a non-literal death glare at him. "Sorry?" he squeaked in apology.

The cauldron began emitted bright sparks as the contaminated potion boiled over the rim.

"Look out!" Tim yelled. "It's gonna blo—!"

Without further warning, the concoction violently expanded, and the ensuing pizza-textured wave sent the three teenagers sailing out into the hall.

"Well, that was gross!" Beast Boy complained as he picked scraps of cheese out of his hair. His efforts were somewhat impeded when Raven picked him up by the back of his shirt and threw the green figure several paces down the hallway.

"Now look what you've done!" the purple-haired girl literally growled.

"Uh... Raven," the wizard-in-training interrupted hesitantly, "is it supposed to do that?"

The female Black turned her attention away from procuring new potion ingredients out of her green teammate's hide and followed Tim's outstretched hand to her room. In the few moments that she had been inattentive, the amorphous cheese-and-bread mass had coalesced into a vaguely humanoid blob.

"Great," Raven summarized in her typically dry manner as the magically-sustained creature turned and charged through her wall, escaping the tower and heading straight towards the city.

"We're going to need a biiiig napkin," Tim agreed dully.

Lex Luthor walked into the crowded conference room and listened to the gathered villains' grumbled complaints. After a few moments, he signaled for them to be quiet.

"Soon, People," he addressed the mob, "the Secret Society will no longer exist. Instead, you'll become the new ruling class of the universe. You are the lucky few, the chosen—witnesses to the moment I seize my godhead."

"Luthor, what game is this?" an individual dressed in children's clothes asked. "Because so far it's not much fun."

"Bear with me, Toyman," the bald criminal replied duly, "you'll get the hang of it. You're going to help me gather some newly discovered pieces of Brainiac."

"Swell," Goldface retorted discontentedly. "So you merge with a living computer like you did before, you become more powerful than all of us put together... but what do we get?"

"You'll all be my lieutenants in the new order," Luthor pledged. "Of course," he continued when several of the gathered criminals frowned, "if you don't like those terms, then you'd better stop me now while you still have a chance." Lex slowly brought his hand to his belt. "But, you'd also better remember what happened to poor Goldface," he added, and pressed the button concealed in his belt buckle.

Almost immediately, the gold-colored individual in question collapsed, crying out in agony as smoke boiled from behind his mask.

"I'm already more powerful than all of you put together," Lex asserted smugly as he calmly observed the other man's anguish.

"Umm... excuse me?" another person at the table hesitantly interrupted. "Don't take this the wrong way, but... what exactly are we doing?"

"I was coming to that," Luthor replied, before withdrawing a remote control from his pocket and activating it.

Almost immediately, the room began to tremble as the sound of igniting rocket engines echoed throughout the complex. Everyone save Lex, who knew what to expect, fell to the floor as the entire concealed base shot into the sky.

Once the complex achieved orbit, Luthor again addressed his shell-shocked audience. "I reconfigured Grodd's cloaking field into a hyper spatial drive."

"You're not serious?" Killer Frost demanded incredulously.

In response, Luthor initiated the new drive system, propelling the new space station towards his objective at light speed.

In the secured prison wing of the building, a bewildered Grodd slammed against the bars of his cage.

"Why is my headquarters moving?"

Xander was wandering around the station while contemplated his overwhelming boredom. It sort of figured, really. He was at the center of the biggest permanent good guy convention ever seen, and there was precisely nothing to do.

"Well, I could always pop on down to Gotham and check on Nuni," he thought aloud. "And dropping in on the Bat being bossed around by Wonder Woman in his very own cave would be funny to see." The Sunnydale resident snorted at the League's unofficial policy of acceding to the Wayne scion's every whim. And the supposed heroes were hardly alone in their endeavor. The villains were so frightened of the completely human 'Dark Knight' that Xander was seriously considering performing a blood test. Given the amount of fear that the detective spread without effort, he just had to be related to the Potter family somewhere down the line.

He momentarily amused himself by recalling a few of the many stupid, over the top plans to kill the terrifying crime fighter—each with at least one gigantic, not to mention obvious, loop hole to provide the Bat with an easy exit. Xander hummed to himself in thought. 'Then again, villains the multiverse over seem to share that fatal flaw. Maybe there's some sort of Evil Academy or something—that could explain the number of retarded 'Big Bads' of late.'

Either way, the man decided, he still needed something to do—and he somehow doubted that vampires and other creepy crawlies were going to make an obliging appearance.

Then he saw it. Him. Whatever. The answer to his problem.

Xander smiled happily. "Hey there! How are you?"

The blue-skinned being blinked as he found his hand shaken by an unknown man. It was not so much the notion that he was approached by the strange individual that surprised him—such a thing was regrettably a regular occurrence—but rather that the League's resident 'Weirdness Magnet' felt that he should know this person.

"Eh... I'm ok," Blue Devil replied. "Not to sound rude but... who are you?"

Xander shrugged. "Me? I'm nobody special. Just a guy looking for a place to drink and party."

Dan Cassidy rolled his eyes at the man dressed in the weird leather coat that resembled a cross between a flared cape and armor. 'Great, another mysterious Leaguer,' he silently grumbled. 'Couldn't these guys ever just sit down and have a beer or something? Maybe go to a beach cookout or a bar-b-que?'

Stifling his objections, Blue Devil instead decided to dismiss the almost-routine oddity. "Whatever. I'm just about to go to Metropolis and visit some friends. Want to come along?"

Xander grinned. "As long as it involves a bar, lots of alcohol, and a good fight, I'm in."

Dan stared for a moment before shrugging. "Ya know? This might be the beginnings of a beautiful friendship. How're you at fighting demons, devils and other supernatural creeps, nerds and idiots?"

Xander smiled at the blue guy as they walked to the teleporter. "Oh, I dabble. You know, dusting a few vamps here, kicking Deadboy's butt over there, double-teaming with my brother to lay the smack down on a hellbitch called Glorificus... stuff like that. I may not be the best, but I've been around the block a time or two."

"Glorificus?" Dan echoed hoarsely. He recognized the name, both from his regular job and from a book that Cain forced on him once upon a time. If it was truly the same creature as who he was thinking of... then what was this guy?

The other man nodded. "Yeah, she's dead now—may what passes for her demonic soul rot forever—but she annoyed several people before she kicked the bucket. Come to think of it, that's one of the reasons we killed her in the first place," Xander admitted, laying a hand on his companion's back. "Well, besides being an evil demon, that is. How 'bout I tell you about it over a beer? It makes an interesting story."

The blue-skinned figure considered his new acquaintance. The man beside him was humorous, self-deprecating, relaxed, and appeared ordinary by any standards of the word. And yet...

The Blue Devil grinned. This was definitely a being he could respect.

"I still can't believe you talked me into this," Tim complained from the back seat of the T-Car as he pulled at his newly transfigured uniform.

Having informed the rest of the Titans as to the nature of the latest emergency, Tim received a shock when Robin invited him along to stop the magically created creature. Batman's latest protégé reasoned that magic might well be required to stop the impending disaster and, if it took on the abilities of the shape shifter Clayface as well, more mystics were always better.

While the Boy Wonder's suggestion was somewhat unexpected, it was still reasonable under the circumstances. No, the young wizard's disbelief stemmed from Robin's rushed suggestion for a costumed alter ego. Apparently, the domino-mask-wearing teen had been giving the issue some thought, as he came prepared with a sketched proposal. The suggested design, though simple in execution, seemed to blend the uniforms of the British teen's two new biological parents. The drawing illustrated a black t-shirt with the traditional red House of El shield across the chest with accompanying leather jacket, a pair of black jeans, and black boots. In fact, Gotham's youngest vigilante had even thought up a codename of sorts.

Superboy.

'At least there weren't any knickers visible,' Tim thought, more than a little relieved given the American superheroes odd fashion choices.

Tim shook off the mental tangent. "I mean, trademark infringement aside, you do know that it's a tossup between Joe and Kara to see who's gonna kill me, right?" the young wizard continued in a worried tone.

"Somehow, I think that Father will find it more amusing than anything," Raven announced as Cyborg slid through another turn, "and I am sure that Supergirl will understand."

"Raven is right, and you look very 'of the hot'," Starfire added helpfully.

Blinking repeatedly, the newly christened Superboy stammered, "Uhh... thanks. So... any ideas on how to stop the pizza golem?"

Suppressing his sudden burning curiosity as to whether the other teen was vulnerable to Kryptonite, Robin answered, "If it's anything like Clayface, then let's try to freeze it solid. We should be able to transport it then. I hope that it can't separate its mass and go in multiple directions simultaneously. If it does, though, we'll split into two teams; you'll go with Beast Boy and Cyborg, while Raven and Starfire will go with me. Cyborg, any luck tracking this thing?"

The tall teen's biological eye narrowed as he frowned at the vehicle's console. "Not yet."

Beast Boy looked over at Tim. "Dude, can't you, like, see through buildings and stuff with X-ray vision or something?"

Tim shook his head. "I've just got the strength and speed—the rest of Kryptonian powers haven't come in yet—and, unlike Joe, I haven't learned how to use Mage Sight to see anything other than magic yet."

"There's the trail!" Cyborg called as the car abruptly changed direction again.

"And there's the walking junk food!" Robin finished. "Titans, go!"

"Hey, what's going on?" Gorilla Grodd shouted. "I demand to know what is going on!"

"Quiet, Grodd," a harsh whisper sounded as Tala faded into view in front of his cage.

"You," the furred telepath grumbled. "Come to gloat at me again? I'm not some monkey in the zoo throwing—"

"Shhh," she interrupted. "I've been very, very bad. I backed the wrong pony. It should have been you."

"Oh, you finally sussed it out." Grodd smirked. "That hairless sweetheart of yours isn't a leader—he's a thug."

"And how," the sorceress agreed. "I don't like to compete for Lex with a dead computer. I want you to be my man in charge, like before. So... Baby, what do you want?"

Grodd smiled. "Why, only you, My Dear... and Luthor's fat head on a plate."

"Thank you for dropping by, Mr. Black," Pamela Isley breathed gratefully as the wizard Apparated next to her at the mostly empty nightclub. "He burst in here a few moments ago, bellowing something about having a bounty on you. Then he saw the girls rehearsing for tonight and well..." The redhead pointed over at a corner table, where the intrusive male was dubiously entertaining Harley, Roxy, and Circe.

Well, the two Gothamites seemed rather engaged with the spectacle at any rate. The purple-haired sorceress, on the other hand, seemed to be plotting what animal transfiguration would best rid her of the unwelcome interruption to her vocal practice.

He nodded. "All right then. Let's go see what this is all about," he decided before approaching the loud, brash man. The individual certainly stood out in a crowd, Harry decided, what with his biker clothing, wild black hair, and white skin. The unusual weapons he had strapped to his person—an over sized pistol, heavy chain, and crowbar—were rather distinctive as well. Somehow, Harry couldn't shake the feeling of familiarity with the individual.

"Excuse me," the wizard interrupted a crude account of the other man's... questionably private exploits, "but I understand that you wished to see me?"

"Buzz off, Shrimp!" the monotone punk growled without looking at who addressed him. "Can't you see I'm busy right now?"

Tilting his head sideways in confusion—and not a little amusement—Harry continued. "Yes, but I'm a little curious about this bounty that you're supposedly looking to collect."

"Yeah, yeah," the strange man grunted. "The geek's name is Black or something."

"I see," Harry admitted as he finally recognized the uncouth individual as being the bounty hunter Lobo. "Well, I'm Mr. Black so... what's the deal with this bounty, then?"

That, at least, seemed to gain the other's attention. Turning around in his chair, the Czarnian glanced over him. "You're this 'Mr. Black' geek that everyone's so afraid of?"

Grinning slightly, Harry nodded.

"The fraggin' Grim Reaper himself?"

"Something like that," Harry agreed.

"The universe's very own Agent of Vengeance?"

"Umm... sometimes. Kinda."

"The Big Cheese of Big Cheeses?"

One ebony eyebrow unconsciously rose. "Can't say as I've heard that one before," Harry admitted, "but they're probably talking about me as well."

"The ultimate bad boy bastich?"

Harry scratched the back of his head. "Err... possibly?"

"Hahahahaha!"

"What, exactly, is so funny?" the wizard demanded.

"The Dvarkian Privateering Syndicate sent the Main Man to the Krypton system... and then all the way out to this rat-infested mud ball after some super powered geek who tossed an asteroid through one of their cruisers... and this little pip squeak is all I got to show for it?" Lobo demanded of no one in particular.

Harry nodded in sudden comprehension. "Oh, yeah, I had almost forgotten about that."

"Wait a minute!" Roxy interrupted. "You threw an asteroid through a spaceship?"

The wizard shrugged before repeating Teleute's comment. "Well, they were a bunch of murdering pirates who were fixing to kill a bunch of innocent people."

The women present just stared at him blankly.

Smiling weakly, he amended, "Would you believe that it was an accident?"

"Alright, Geekwad," the mentally-unstable intergalactic biker blurted, "this is how things're gonna go down. Seein' as how you're so small and puny, the Main Man's gonna give you a freebie." The hulking Czarnian hopped out of his chair and ambled over to face Harry. Jutting out his chin, he invited, "Go ahead. Clock me a good one."

The Harry's eye twitched as he heard little more than 'small', 'puny', and 'clock me'. The wizard smiled—

—right before a magically-reinforced boot caught Lobo in a rather sensitive region, launching the screaming man through the roof. Calmly conjuring an Acme mallet, the slighted magician waited for the shrieking extraterrestrial to return from his unscheduled flight. Harry smoothly swept forward and—when the incapacitated thug crashed back through the ceiling—caught the falling man dead-center with the business end of the giant hammer. With another garbled expletive, the bounty hunter's flight path abruptly turned horizontal and terminated against the far wall.

Groaning, Lobo rose unsteadily to his feet and began to advance, drawing both a large pistol and a crowbar from their holsters as he did so.

Unfortunately, an overpowered Disarming Hex sent the white-skinned adversary colliding roughly with the cracked wall again, leaving Harry juggling a total of four pistols, two sawed-off shotguns, various explosives, several rifle-like objects—whose purposes he could not begin to fathom—a large crowbar, a pair of studded fingerless gloves, a multitude of exotic bladed weapons, and a long unwieldy chain with a hooked end. Since the monochrome ruffian was rather disoriented by this point, a quick Sticking Charm successfully prevented the other man from escaping the point of

impact a second time—and gave Harry a chance to dispose of the summoned weaponry.

Blinking disbelievingly at the ludicrously over sized pile of armaments—and wondering just where the apparently insane Czarnian could have possibly concealed them all—Harry stowed most of the cache in his gauntlets, save for one of the more familiarly-designed giant revolvers that wouldn't be out of place on a dragon slayer. Considering his options, Harry thoughtfully donned his new pair of offensively-armored half-gloves as well.

"Feetal's Gizz," Lobo grumbled as he attempted to regain his footing—only to discover that he was completely incapable of moving more than his head thanks to the Sticking Charm.

Harry's grinned in a rather satisfied manner as he observed his opponent. "Now, if you're quite finished, perhaps we can discuss this bounty business."

"As soon as I can see straight, I am so fraggin' that bastich," the biker muttered aloud to himself.

Sighing, the unruffled wizard casually walked up to his reeling opponent and made a show of releasing the weapon's magazine. He pocketed all but one of the bullets and held up the last one for inspection. After assuring himself that his pale prisoner was finally paying attention, Harry slid the round back into the gun and spun the cylinder before snapping the revolver closed.

"Now, then," the smug immortal prompted, "let's discuss this... Dvarkian Syndicate, was it?"

Lobo grinned happily. "I ain't feelin' all that talkative just now, Chump." He grinned widely and insincerely added, "Sorry."

Harry pressed the muzzle of the gun to the bounty hunter's abused nether region and pulled back the hammer. "You feel like talking now?"

"Nuthin' doin', Scum Bag!" the last Czarnian retorted. "You're bluffin'!"

With a rather wolfish grin, Harry pulled the trigger.

Click.

"That's one."

Dawn was mindlessly walking down another corridor while pondering what she should call herself, now that she was a costumed crime fighter in a universe full of superheroes. Nodding politely to a passing oriental woman clad in a black-and-white outfit, the girl meandered along on her quest. The young woman did not proceed much further, however, before she was hailed to a stop by the other female.

For her own part, Doctor Light only managed to stare disbelievingly at the young woman in a bikini. Finally regaining her wits, she asked, "Excuse me, young lady, but... May I ask who you are?"

Dawn turned to face the cloaked figure and blurted out the first thing that came to mind. "Oh... me? I'm known as Key, apprentice with the Lovely Angels. Why?"

The woman known as Kimiyo Hoshi unconsciously stiffened. "I didn't think that we would have anyone so... young... on station."

Key rolled her eyes. "It was quite a surprise to me, too," the girl admitted. "I'm here to check on my uncle, Mr. Black. But since he's... busy... I thought I'd see what was for lunch. I can't seem to find the cafeteria, though... you people really should put up some maps or something."

Little of the girl's monologue registered, however, as Kimiyo was still frozen with horror at the League's latest guest. Shakily pointing towards the dining hall, the disheveled Dr. Light seized the earliest opportunity to flee the area in the opposite direction. When her panicked flight abruptly intersected with the Man of Steel, the Japanese woman sighed in relief. "Superman, it's you! Listen, we have a serious problem!"

Superman looked around and noticed the lack of alarm klaxons. A few moments of super-listening was equally fruitless. Shrugging, he replied, "That's... quite alright, Dr. Light. Accidents happen all the time."

Kimiyo shook her head. "Not that. The new girl. Kei. Listen, I don't think playing host to one of the Dirty Pair is a wise idea."

As the woman elaborated on the adventures of Mr. Black's niece, the costumed Clark Kent could only speculate on his complete lack of surprise.

"That's one mother of a laser show," Atomic Skull noted, as he observed their trajectory through hyperspace from the control room.

"Toyman?" Luthor prompted.

"We should be reaching the Brainiac remnants soon," the short villain replied from one of the control chairs. "By the way, Luthor, thank you for making me your navigator. I always did love learning a new controller."

"Just keep us on course," the mastermind retorted. "The slightest error and we're dead."

The bald criminal's orders were interrupted by the sudden explosion at the locked door.

"I wouldn't worry about it, Neanderthal," Grodd stated as he led a large, armed portion of the Secret Society through the newly opened door. The new arrivals spread out and pointed their weapons at Luthor and those of the society loyal to him.

"The way I see it, you're all dead either way."

"—and aside from the space station's limited automated defenses, there are just over two hundred and fifty bums organized into about fifty smaller groups. They're mostly bunked on the lower decks, but the chief mooks keep the loot near their quarters... upper levels above the bridge. The best time to attack is during their pillaging runs, when there's only a few dozen of the bastiches left to guard the place. There's no way of knowing ahead of time when those are gonna be, though. And that's everything I know!"

"Everything?" Harry repeated skeptically, pulling the pistol's hammer back again.

"Yunno how I'm the last Czarnian 'cause I fragged the rest of the planet for my high school science project?" Lobo's gaze searched their vicinity before he lowered his voice. "I was actually tryin' to grow mold on a mug of beer, but a geek with a proton accelerator tripped and set off a chain reaction with the... well, you can guess what happened from there."

Harry blinked in astonishment. 'That's pretty poor luck, accidentally blowing up your entire planet. I mean, not even my luck is that bad... I hope.'

"Well, I think that's everything," the wizard said aloud before Stunning the Czarnian. "Thanks."

"So..." Pamela began. "What are we going to do with him?"

"I've heard that Tartarus's weasel pit has a few openings!" Circe offered eagerly.

He considered the immortal sorceress's suggestion for a few moments, before reluctantly deciding against it. "Perhaps something a little less... bizarre." Inwardly cursing the Cauldron's lack of dungeons again, the wizard Summoned a small glass bottle from the bar. After casting a few improvised Charms on the vessel, Harry shrunk the unconscious Lobo and stuffed him into the container. The addition of an appropriately ventilated cork finished off the impromptu prison, and Harry slid the finished product into a coat pocket.

"Oh, yes," Circe remarked sarcastically, "shrinking the little cretin and keeping him in a pocket is nowhere near as bizarre as sending his soul to the underworld."

Harry shrugged. "Hey, it got rid of him, didn't it? Now, if you lot are all okay, I'm going to go check in on the kids. I'll be in a conference with the other Deaths later this evening so, if you need something, the portable Floo is probably the only way to reach me."

"Alright, Mr. Black," the redhead answered. "Thank you for your help, and please take his pollution-spreading contraption with you. Oh, and could you patch the roof as well?"

He lazily saluted the environmentally-minded metahuman. "Sure thing, Pamela. Later, Ladies." After meandering outside to collect the odd motorcycle-shaped spacecraft and perform a hasty Reparo, Harry Apparated to Jump City in search of a particular pair of adolescent magicians.

The wizard appeared at the kids' headquarters, only to observe that it was completely vacant. The series of loud explosions and columns of smoke coming from town, however, gave him a reasonable idea of their whereabouts. A few moments' flight later and Harry groaned as his hypothesis was proven. The Titans were indeed at the scene of the calamity, and were currently facing off against the instigator.

Or possibly instigators, as a cursory sweep of Mage Sight spotted four identical magical creatures wreaking havoc in separate sections of the city. The blob-like constructs were certainly a strange sight, what with their mindless drive for consumption and their odd texture. It almost looked like—

Harry fought the urge to massage his temples as his heightened sense of smell confirmed what his eyes already told him. His adopted children, along with their band of friends, were having their arses kicked by animated globs of pizza dough.

"I need a vacation," he breathed tiredly before Summoning the magically-augmented treats. As the multitude of flour and toppings soared towards his position above the city, Harry caught the mess with several Freezing Charms. A handful of Vanishing Charms later saved both the day and several dry cleaning bills.

Catastrophe averted, Harry descended to the ground, where the adolescent heroes converged on his position. "Well," he finally stated in a level tone, "that was certainly invigorating."

"Y-yeah, that was pretty cool, wasn't it?" the green shape shifter offered with a weak smile.

Remembering the hassle he endured when the changeling accidentally ruined Zatanna's demon containment circle weeks prior, Harry turned his full attention to the emerald-skinned member of the group.

"Would you like to tell me why a bunch of cheese pizzas were rampaging down Main Street?" the elder wizard demanded intently.

Beast Boy scratched the back of his head as he shuffled his feet nervously. "Uhh... I don't know if they were rampaging, exactly," Gar offered. "It was more of a... threatening slide, I think." He smiled widely—

—Before Raven slapped the back of his head and sent the green boy crashing to the ground. "It was because some idiot dropped a slice of pizza in a potion I was brewing," she informed her adopted guardian.

Harry felt an eyebrow rise in inquiry. "Oh? That must have been one heck of a potion to do this. What were you brewing?"

The young witch bowed her head and refused to answer.

The youngest magician, however, apparently felt no such compulsion to remain silent and blurted, "Some weird recipe called... uh... Oblivious Unction, I think."

Harry frowned in thought at the familiar-sounding title before he suddenly recalled Madame Pomfrey using the remedy to treat the welts on Ron's arms after his run-in with the brain creatures in the Department of Mysteries. And if he was not mistaken, the potion could be used to heal any scarring left by thoughts, what with its concentrated form nearly being a match for the Obliviation Charm.

Looking at Raven sharply, he asked Tim, "Dr. Ubbly's Oblivious Unction? From Most Potente Potions?"

"Yeah, that sounds about right," the young man agreed.

"I see," Harry declared, his surveillance of Raven never wavering. "Well, I trust that you all are well?"

Upon receiving a chorus of affirmative statements, he addressed the teenage witch directly. "Raven, when you're finished here, I need to speak with you."

"Go ahead, friend Raven," Starfire urged, oblivious to the tension between the pair. "We can clean the city while you have the talking heart."

Raven briefly glared at the other girl before sighing in resignation. "Thanks, Starfire," the purple-haired girl muttered sarcastically before flying towards the top of a convenient skyscraper.

"You lot take care," Harry offered as he prepared to follow Raven's flight path. "Oh, and Tim?" he suddenly called. "Nice costume."

"Uhh... you're not upset?" the teenaged wizard asked confusedly.

The elder magician shook his head. "On the contrary, Kara and I both figured it was only a matter of time before you got dragged into this line of work." He chuckled. "So, we made a little wager on the approximate time frame. She bet that you'd be at least fifteen before starting the whole costumed crime fighter bit."

"And what was your wager?" Tim asked.

"That you'd have at least one mission before Christmas," Harry replied promptly. "It seemed a lot more realistic." The wizard laughed again at his anticipatory thoughts. "She should have known better than to try to made me wear pink."

Obviously interested, Robin asked, "So... what's her forfeit?"

Smiling brightly, the wizard replied, "Supergirl has to patrol for an entire week—in a pink bunny costume."

"You've got to be joking!" Cyborg protested.

Harry shook his head happily.

Beast Boy punch the air. "That's totally awesome!"

Tipping his hat, Harry lifted off the ground before one last thought occurred to him. "By the way, Gar... I trust that we've learned to be more careful around magic from now on?"

The green-skinned boy rubbed the back of his head nervously. "He he. Yeah, sorry about that."

"Good," Harry replied simply. "Don't be alarmed if Raven isn't back in the next few hours—we may be a while." One last nod and he took to the skies.

Suffice it to say that Harry's Seeker skills were not required to locate the blue-cloaked girl amidst Jump City's skyline, and the wizard quickly joined Raven at her chosen roost.

Mimicking her vertigo-inducing position upon the structure's outermost ledge, Harry sat next to the obviously distressed girl. "So," he began after a few moments of silence, "do you want to talk about it?"

"No," she replied monotonously, her eyes never leaving the far horizon.

"Fair enough," Harry agreed amicably and turned to face the same direction.

Several minutes passed in companionable silence before—

"How do you do it?" Raven quietly demanded. "Why do you do it?"

Harry looked back at the downtrodden young woman at his side. "Do what?" he asked in confusion.

"This whole charade as a metamagi! Your job as a Death!" Raven gestured helplessly. "How can you just keep on helping people with the things you see? Why hasn't it broken you?"

Despite his rather boorish upbringing, Harry recognized a cue to administer comfort when he heard it. Wrapping one arm around the shorter figure's shoulders, he pulled the girl to his side.

Raven shook her head, lost in her memories. "I mean, I only filled in for you for a few hours, but it felt like years! I was so relieved when you woke up and called Mortis back to you."

Harry rubbed her arm in what he hoped was a soothing manner. "I'm sorry, Raven. I never intended to saddle you with this burden."

The young witch shrugged. "This is still better than what Trigon would have done if you hadn't intervened," she admitted tiredly. "It's just... there were so many people in agony while you were shackled. I could handle the old people well enough; I mean, they had already lived their lives, and finally dying was a relief for most of them. But there were others as well... people my age... even little kids! They were so... terrified... and the only thing I could do for them was to... to rip out their souls with your scythe!"

Harry pulled her slight form into his lap so that he could embrace the girl fully. "You did the only thing you could do, Raven," he told her gently. "It was simply their time to die, and you gave them peace."

"Dee Dee said the same thing when she took me to her place," Raven admitted. "My friends, too. But, if that's true, then why does it still feel like I failed?"

The elder magician smiled sadly. "Because, Raven, despite Trigon's influence, despite all the people who spurned you as a child because of that foolish prophecy and the enemies you've faced since then... you're still a good person. You hate it when people suffer needlessly, but you hate being unable to help them even more."

He squeezed her reassuringly. "And you know what?" he asked rhetorically. "That's a good thing."

She was quiet for several minutes, and Harry would have thought her asleep if he did not sense her heartbeat and breathing rate—both too accelerated for slumber.

"I know in my head that what you're saying is true," she finally admitted softly. "But in my heart... I still feel like I let everyone down, like I wasn't good enough."

Harry smiled slightly. "Oh, I don't know. You figured things out well enough to keep the universe from imploding while I was wool gathering—I'd certainly put that one in the 'win' column."

The girl remained silent, guiding him to the true heart of the matter.

"The whole 'personification of Death' thing threw you for a loop, didn't it?" he stated rather than asked.

Raven chuckled awkwardly at his gross oversimplification. "You could say that," she murmured. "I always thought of Death as just a state of being... I didn't know it was an actual occupation! It's... a lot to take in all at once."

"Yeah, it sorta took me by surprise the first time I'd first heard of it myself," Harry admitted ruefully, memories of his private meeting at the Midway City museum vividly coming to mind. "Do you think it would help if you saw the whole 'Soul Reaping' business from another vantage point?"

The girl looked up at him confusedly. "What do you mean, 'another vantage point'?"

"Well, as it so happens, my home dimension is one of the attendees for the next Union meeting," he explained. "According to the note that Grim left, this century's meeting is being held in the Polynesian underworld. I thought I'd drop by a little early—you know, check out the accommodations and everything. You interested in joining me?"

Raven blinked. "Me? Intentionally going to the afterlife on a business trip? I mean, I know that Dee Dee said I was some sort of Death substitute, but still..."

Shrugging lightly, Harry just nodded. "Well, you are part of the family now. You may as well learn now that these sorts of things always happen to us. Remind me to tell you sometime about this mishap I had with your... uncle's... universal remote control."

The witch huffed in a resigned fashion. "Why not? It can't be worse than refereeing another game of stank ball between Beast Boy and Cyborg."

"That's the ticket!" he approved loudly, but grew silent as another thought crossed his mind. "By the way, our host is Hine-nui-te-pō, so I'd recommend against mentioning either her father or her husband while she's in ear shot. Actually, mum's the word completely if you can manage."

Raven frowned slightly. "Why shouldn't I talk about those two people?"

Harry looked mildly uncomfortable as he replied, "Actually, it's just the one person."

The pair of magicians looked at each other for several moments before Raven finally found her voice again.

"Ohhh-kaaay."

Tala fired another Blasting Hex, destroying a staircase and cutting off Luthor's attempt to escape the civil war yet again.

"Trapped like a rat!" she almost purred in satisfaction. "It's very weird," the sorceress noted as she prepared to kill the former object of her affection. "You were never this much fun when we were together."

The scorned woman released her spell, but the energy impacted an imperceivable barrier and ricocheted, sending her crashing to the floor instead of her intended target.

Lex smirked before retrieving an oddly decorated protective amulet from his shirt pocket. "You wouldn't believe what this cost me."

"Well, this was a complete waste of time!" Galatea grumbled from the Javelin's co-pilot seat. "I thought that an interstellar mission would be a little more exciting. What's the matter, all the villains out sick today?"

An almost identical blonde glanced over from the piloting station. "I believe that this is the point where Joe would groan and say something about jinxing the situation."

The white-unitard-clad woman smiled as the sparse conversation finally turned to a more entertaining topic. "Speaking of our friendly neighborhood super-god and groaning... how was it?"

"How was what?" Kara asked as she made an adjustment to the flight plan

"You know," the fair-headed clone replied suggestively. "While you were having fun, I had to keep your boy toy's undead coworkers from dismantling the Watchtower out of sheer curiosity of how everything worked. Now spill!" she ordered.

The original Argosian failed to entirely suppress her smile. "If you must know, he was a perfect gentleman the entire time."

Galatea glared at her sister. "That wasn't what I asked, and you know it!"

Supergirl smiled brightly. "Yeah, I do," she admitted easily.

"Arrrg! Come on, already!" the taller blonde whined. "Ninety percent of the super crowd is hesitant to even nod at me when passing in the hallway. I've gotta live vicariously through you."

The shorter woman snorted. "You're pathetic, you know that?"

"Whatever," the recently-christened Powergirl dismissed. "Now give me details before I beat them out of you!"

"Fine," Kara sighed as she rechecked the instrumentation. "You know how Joe was during those training sessions on Avalon? How he could run through all those magic and martial arts lessons with both of us and the kids—and still had energy to burn?"

The duplicate Argosian nodded hurriedly. "Yeah, yeah. So?"

"Oh, look!" Supergirl suddenly exclaimed while pointing out the side viewport. "There's a comet."

Galatea stared hard at the other metahuman's clumsy topic change. "I hate you, you miserable tease."

"You know, Joe kept saying that exact same thing," the pilot confided smugly.

The taller blonde growled impotently.

"Give it up, Lex!" Grodd shouted as he tracked the human with his rifle. "You're only delaying the inevitable."

"You're right," the bald genius agreed as he stepped into view wearing a pair of gauntlets. The furred primate shot Luthor point-blank, but the human successfully intercepted the energy blast with the strange articles.

Grodd shrugged and discarded the weapon. "If it's all the same to you, I'd like to snap your neck with my bare hands." He proceeded to suit actions to words, almost casually punching and kicking Luthor around the cargo bay.

As Luthor struggled to rise to his feet, the gorilla smirked. "You know, this mutiny was easy. The Secret Society hates you."

"Like they love you," Lex protested before launching another futile charge. "Hairy simian... half-baked objectivist."

Grodd hoisted Luthor to eye level via the human's shirt. "You're ill-equipped to lead, Lex."

"A lower primate," the human mastermind gasped, "masquerading as an intellectual."

"I'm the more accomplished, both physically and mentally." To prove his latest point, Grodd attempted to use his mind control on the captive human.

Luthor quickly activated a device on his belt, turning the primate's own mental assault against him.

"It took you long enough," Lex retorted as Grodd collapsed. "I was beginning to think that I figured you wrong. Now, bow down to me."

Though obviously against his will, the gorilla reluctantly obeyed the order.

"Who is master here?" Luthor demanded of the kneeling ape.

"Y-you a-are," Grodd nearly spat the reply.

"Get up!" his captor suddenly ordered. "Take six steps forward."

The gorilla complied, walking himself against his will into an open airlock. Once Grodd was inside, Lex shut the inner doors and cancelled the telepathic shield, releasing the monkey from his control.

Realizing his situation, Grodd futilely beat his fists against the reinforced glass. "I should have let you rot in jail."

"Good bye, Grodd," Luthor stated in reply. "It could have gone either way."

"It really could have, couldn't it?"

"No," the bald man smirked, "but why speak ill of the dead?" Stabbing the airlock release control with a finger, Lex Luthor watched as his rival was sent screaming into the depths of space.

"Well, that felt weird," Raven commented dryly as Harry Apparated the pair to the coordinates left with the invitation. The purpled-haired girl took in their surroundings, which resembled nothing more than an upscale tropical resort. "Are you sure that we're in the right place?"

Before Harry could respond, a scythe-wielding skeleton on horseback appeared in front of them.

"Sorry about that," the new arrival apologized. "I wasn't watching where I was going."

"It's quite alright," Harry allowed. "No harm done."

The skeleton looked in Harry's direction and froze. "I can't believe it!" he breathed. "You're Mr. Black!"

The addressed wizard had a sudden and uncomfortable recollection of his first visit to Diagon Alley. "Guilty as charged, Mr...?"

"Zane!" the figure shouted as he seized Harry's arm and began shaking it furiously. "I mean, my name is Zane," he continued in a calmer tone. "It's an honor to meet you, Mr. Black, Sir. You're my biggest fan!"

Harry blinked confusedly.

"I mean I'm your biggest fan!" he suddenly corrected embarrassedly.

Raven looked up at her adopted father. "I didn't realize you were so popular," she commented.

The wizard rolled his eyes at the Leaky Cauldron sequel. All that was missing was—

"Are you kidding?" Zane exclaimed as he removed what was apparently a skull mask, rather than his actual skull. Underneath the face covering, the figure appeared to be an ordinary human. "His exploits been all over the Purgatory News Network! Oh, sorry, I mean alleged exploits. This past month alone he's defeated two gods, a titan, and their armies more-or-less singlehandedly! Could I get a quick picture with you? An autograph, maybe?"

Harry sighed. 'Ah, there it is.'

The girl smiled. "I know, I was there." She glanced at Harry before asking the earnest fan boy a question. "He didn't... get in trouble for any of that, did he?"

The excitable young man laughed. "Oh, I heard that there were a few people who would have liked to discuss the matter, but they're too scared of him to actually confront him."

Harry crossed his arms and huffed in irritation. "I am right here, you know," he informed the other Death. "And, Raven, I don't care who got miffed, I don't regret helping you a bit."

"Thank you, Father."

Zane blinked. "Wait a minute!" he suddenly blurted in realization. "You're that girl he killed Trigon over, right?"

Harry put an arm around Raven's shoulders and gently nudged her past the self-professed fan. "It was nice meeting you, Zane, but we really must be going. I just spotted some friends of ours."

Ignoring the babbled farewells from the crazed Death, the duo headed towards a familiar pair of skeletons. "Hi, guys," Harry greeted. "I have to admit that I didn't expect to have a meeting this soon."

"Hello, Boss. Nice to see ya again, Raven," Grim greeted. "And in case you couldn't tell, this is Bill."

"HELLO," the addressed Death acknowledged the Blacks' presence.

"Hi, Bill. I'm glad to see that Grim's being supervised," Harry noted with some amusement. "Sorry for the incident last night, by the way. You did kinda interrupt things, though."

"No worries," the Jamaican skeleton dismissed the matter. "Mandy does it to me at least three times a week. I take it dat you conquered the she-demon, den?"

Harry rubbed the back of his head. "Err... I guess you could put it that way."

"Excuse me, Mr. Grim," Raven asked suddenly, "but why did you come through that portal when you could have just Apparated?"

"Well," the addressed skeleton scratched his skull sheepishly, "teleporting across dimensions kinda leaves me queasy, so I jus' use me scythe to cut open a portal. You just t'ink about where you gonna go, push a little magic into de blade, and 'den you just slice in front of you. Like so."

Grim demonstrated the scythe travel technique. Unfortunately, the portal's destination seemed to be occupied already—by some sort of tentacle monster that didn't appreciate the new hole in the dimensional barrier. This dislike was quickly demonstrated as one of the creature's appendages shot out and seized Grim.

Before his... assistant could be devoured, Harry launched several Reductor Curses into the... thing's... flesh. Once the beast relinquished its hold, the somewhat battered Grim Reaper released the portal.

"T'anks, Boss," Grim said gratefully. "I forgot dat Billy left one of his pets in dere."

"MOST IMPRESSIVE," Bill agreed. "I AM ALSO GLAD THAT YOUR OFFSPRING IS INTERESTED IN KEEPING WITH TRADITION. I CAN NEVER CONVINCE MY GRANDDAUGHTER TO ACCOMPANY ME ON THESE RETREATS. SHE PREFERS TO HAVE A... NORMAL LIFE."

Grim shrugged. "I don't know why she like dat. Dese get-togethers are neva' borin', what wit' de swappin' of stories, and games and all."

Bill piped up, a hint of humor in his otherwise menacing voice. "I MADE SURE TO BRING THE WIZARD RINCEWIND'S LIFETIMER THIS TIME; IT TRULY HAS TO BE SEEN TO BE BELIEVED."

"Well, let's get inside and have a look at it," Harry suggested.

"VERY WELL," the other Death agreed. "MR. BLACK, MIGHT I ASK A FAVOR?"

"I suppose that would depend on the favor," the wizard offered cautiously. "What do you need?"

"THE LAST TIME I ATTENDED ONE OF THESE MEETINGS, ANUBIS PLAYED ME IN SENET AND WON REPEATEDLY. SINCE THEN, HE HAS NEVER FAILED TO MAKE FUN OF HOW MUCH HE WON FROM ME. IF HE SHOULD CHALLENGE ME AGAIN, WOULD YOU PLEASE PLAY ON MY BEHALF?"

"I'm afraid that my Senet's a little rusty," Harry replied while inwardly wondering exactly what a 'Senet' was.

"I CAN REFRESH YOUR MEMORY ON THE RULES," Bill offered immediately.

Harry just sighed. That familiar feeling that things were about to go wrong was back, right on schedule.

His mind racing, Lex led the restrained captive sorceress to his auxiliary laboratory. While Sinestro and Volcano insured that the witch remained in check, the bald criminal genius activated the lights.

"Darling, Grodd must have used mind control," the increasingly nervous prisoner theorized helplessly. After all three members of her audience failed the plausibility of such an event, she discarded the idea. "Okay, maybe not. But, Baby, you don't ever doubt that I love you, correct?"

Luthor only barely suppressed the involuntary eye roll, instead opting to glare at the purple-haired woman.

"I know I've been bad," Tala continued piteously. "I'm a sick person. You don't know what it's like to be me."

Smirking slightly, the mastermind approached his captive. "Don't worry, Darling," he sarcastically addressed her, "You still have a big role in my plans. In fact, I can't do this without you."

On cue, Volcana struck the other woman at the base of the neck, rendered the magician unconscious. This deception gave the three criminals enough time to install their former colleague in an odd, chamber-like machine. Within a few minutes, however, the witch regained consciousness and Luthor continued his monologue from earlier.

"I used to think that magic was unknowable, unpredictable, and not to be trusted. You've taught me so much, Tala. Even my wealth of scientific knowledge would have never been up to this task. You will be the mystic conduit that will siphon Brainiac's essence from the debris. I'll be able to reconstitute him from that energy... but I doubt you'll see it."

"Y-you planned this all along," Tala stuttered. "Even before I..."

In a low, monotonous tone, Lex confided, "I'm a sick person, too."

"Luthor," Toyman announced from the machine's control board, "the collection panels are in place."

Hearing the announcement, the sorceress made one last, desperate plea for her life. "Lex! Please! I beg you!"

"Hold that thought," the bald man informed her mockingly before turning his attention back to Toyman. "Do it!"

After several obviously scream-free seconds, Lex began to lose his temper. "I said, 'Do it!'"

"He cannot hear you, Lex Luthor," a cultured voice suddenly announced in the silence.

Lex faced the voice's source and found an oddly-dressed man seating in a flying chair.

"Time has stopped," the strange character continued. "We exist between two ticks of the clock. In my travels through the myriad paths of infinity, I have seen the first and the last. But what you do today threatens the entire universe—past, present, and future."

Raising an eyebrow mockingly, the last Luthor replied, "I should hope it does. Look, I didn't catch the name."

"Metron," the man obligingly identified himself, "scientist and chronicler."

"Well, Metron, I'll soon be ready for anything the universe can throw at me. I'm about to become a god."

Rising to his feet atop the levitating throne chair, Metron replied, "You don't know what a god is... or what you are unleashing."

"Tampering with forces beyond my ken and so forth?" Lex mockingly inquired. "Nice try! If you want my power, make your move. Otherwise, you can get lost."

"You will regret your decision," the man pronounced solemnly as his chair grew blindingly bright. "We all will."

When the light faded, the chair and its occupant were gone, and time resumed its natural pace.

"Twinkle, twinkle, Brainiac," Toyman sang, "Tala's gonna bring you back." The short figure pulled the lever.

"Lex!" Tala cried out in agony before she was no longer in any coherent condition.

Ignoring her screams, Lex pressed his face to the glass of the chamber, as the vessel began to collect the filtered energy from Brainiac's debris field. "Brainiac!" he called out mindlessly. "I'm coming!" As the particles began to coalesce into a humanoid form, Luthor called out, "People, prepare to greet your new lord and master!"

When the haze cleared, however, Brainiac was nowhere to be found.

The newly revived Darkseid, on the other hand, was quite visible.

"It seems I have you to thank for my resurrection," the awoken dictator announced calmly. "Though your world will suffer slowly, I grant you a quick death."

In a blinding red haze, Darkseid's omega beams demolished the orbiting stronghold in a single shot.

The gathered Deaths behind Harry cheered as the wizard's latest throw of the knuckle bone allowed the last of his mushroom-shaped pawns to move to Anubis's side of the board. The jackal god seemed to grimace before abruptly shoving his part of the wager—the supposed first edition of the 'Book of Coming'—towards Harry's seat.

"Right, then," the wizard accepted the manuscript, "thank you for the interesting game, but we really should—"

"AGAIN!" Anubis growled.

"But I'm sure that some of these other Deaths would like to play, too, and—"

"AGAIN!"

Upon receiving some encouraging gestures from the crowd, Harry shrugged and turned back to the hulking part-Jackal humanoid.

"Okay, then," Harry accepted, "but I still have my Crystal Skull and your Book. Do you have anything else you wish to wager?"

Anubis withdrew a bronze vase from his robes. "COMMAND OVER MY ARMY," he replied before removing the jackal-head lid.

Black sand instantly boiled out of the canopic jar and filled the air. Within moments, the dark cloud coalesced into orderly ranks of jackal warriors armed with strange looking scythes. After a few moments, the Egyptian god replaced the stopper—which banished the soldiers.

"Deal," Harry agreed. "Would you like to—" Anubis snatched the knuckle bone from the table "—go first?" he finished.

The game was both short and brutal, and it ended exactly as its predecessor. No sooner had Harry moved the last of his game pieces to the other side of the board, however, then Anubis overturned the table in disgust and stomped out of sight.

Harry blinked after the rapidly dwindling figure. "Was it something I said?" he asked his gathered colleagues, only to receive laughter in reply. Shrugging to himself, the wizard began gathering his winnings in preparation to depart—before the table and Anubis's fallen chair righted themselves.

"Not so fast, handsome," the... well... partially-beautiful woman called out sweetly as she took the newly repaired seat.

The new arrival was certainly a distinctive individual; half the woman's body was the blue-black flesh one might expect on an Inferi, while the remainder would not have been out of place on a supermodel.

"My name's Hel," the Death goddess continued, "and I was wondering if you've ever heard of Nine Men's Morris."

Kara re-entered the cockpit after her run to the galley and glanced over the displays. "Hey, aren't we a little close to the Apokolips system?"

"So?" her cloned twin questioned. "All the League's reports claim that their planet's engulfed in civil war. I'll bet they aren't even monitoring out this far. And even if they do, it's not like we couldn't outrun them at this distance."

"Maybe so," the shorter blonde admitted, "but their technology is pretty advanced stuff, and no one's really sure how far those motherboxes of theirs can sense."

"Ah, come on!" Galatea complained. "What are you afraid of, Darkseid suddenly resurrecting himself and popping out of a black hole right in front of us?"

Her sarcastic report was greeted with a sudden shrill alarm, as the autopilot's collision avoidance system detected a new gravity anomaly directly in front of them. The two females looked out the

viewport and immediately saw the new Boom Tube disgorge the very topic of their previous conversation.

"You were saying?" Kara demanded as she switched to manual controls. "Hang on!"

The blonde pilot performed several evasive maneuvers, but the new arrival's versatile omega beam ultimately disposed of the Javelin, rendering the two women both stranded and unconscious. Within moments, Darkseid had caught up his quarry.

"Most fortuitous," Darkseid announced calmly as he studied Kara. "Fate has seen fit to not only resurrect me but also provide the means of Superman's destruction." He then turned to regard his other captive. "You, I have no use for," the tyrant decided, employing his omega beam once again.

The twin scarlet rays seemed illuminate the unconscious Galatea's white suit before she disappeared, leaving Darkseid alone with his Argosian prize.

With his motherbox's assistance, another Boom Tube quickly left the sector of space vacant save for some scattered debris.

Their playing of the odd variant of Tic-Tac-Toe—in which Hel seemed most unwilling to wager stakes—was interrupted several minutes later by the sound of raucous barking. No sooner had Harry decided that the barking sounded familiar than he was tackled to the ground, as three large tongues seemed to compete against each other to slobber over him the fastest.

"Hello, Cerberus," Harry greeted once he worked himself free—a not inconsiderable feat. "What are you doing here?"

"I brought him," a man's voice supplied from behind him.

Harry turned and caught sight of the brunette speaker and his attractive blonde companion. "Hello, Lady Persephone," he greeted warmly, before his tone cooled several degrees. "Hades. To what do I owe this... honor? Were you hoping for Round Two, perhaps?"

The other man grimaced and clenched his fists—before his wife elbowed him firmly in the ribs.

"We talked about this, Hades," the slight goddess chastised. "Now, unless you want to spend the next millennia sharing Cerberus's bed instead of mine, tell him."

The Lord of the Grecian Underworld frown grew even grimmer—if such a thing was possible—but he reluctantly approached the recent bane of his existence.

"I'm... sorry," Hades bit out, sounding as if he would like nothing more than to burn the other man to a cinder.

Harry got out of his chair and faced the new arrival directly. "Apology... accepted," the wizard replied, and everyone within earshot could almost feel his indecision on which vital organ he wanted to cut out of the other man with a rusty spoon first.

The two black-haired men stared at one another for several moments in silence—before a loud and rather forced cough from Persephone prompted things back into motion.

"Would you mind keeping Cerberus from now on?" Hades asked duly. "He's done nothing but mope around ever since you left Tartarus."

Harry looked at the tall, three-headed dog for a few moments before nodding in agreement.

"Good," the Greek god continued in a more interested tone, "I've wanted to try out the Hydra as a gate guardian anyway."

"Really?" Harry verified with equal engrossment. "I've wanted to strike up a conversation with a Hydra for ages—ever since my last scuffle with a Basilisk when I was younger."

"You can talk to serpents, too?" Hades demanded incredulously.

Harry nodded with a slight smirk, causing the other man to plant his face in one hand.

"Oh, goodie!" Persephone bubbly announced. "I just knew you two could be friends! Well, I've got to go. Some of the girls and I are going out for the night. Toodles!"

The woman vanished, drawing Harry's attention back to his... former... opponent. "Is she always like that?" he asked.

Hades just dipped his head forlornly.

"You have my sympathies, Mate," Harry offered, knowing first-hand what living in close proximity to a woman like that could do to a bloke.

After all, he had Kara and Henchgirl to contend with on a daily basis, not to mention several droves of Kitsune and Veela.

The wizard was going to comment further, but he suddenly noticed the hungry gaze in his new pet's gaze. Neither was Harry unaware that those six eyes were firmly staring at the skeletal-appearing Deaths present.

"Tell you what, Hades," the magician decided. "How about you take over for me here with Hel while I take Cerberus to get some lunch?"

The man nodded in assent and took Harry's seat at the game table.

Informing Raven that he would return momentarily, Harry Apparated the hellhound away before the canine caused a diplomatic incident.

"That rodent Vundabar thinks he can rule Apokolips in Darkseid's stead," Bernadeth shouted to her fellow Furies and their attending soldiers. "We'll be the ones to deliver his pestilence-ridden corpse to Granny Goodness!"

As the artillery began to fire, Granny's co-ed infantry advanced. Not to be outclassed, Baron Virman Vundabar's opposing forces countered in kind as the combined might of Apokolips rushed to destroy itself.

It was to this tremendous charge that Darkseid's Boomtube opened, and he strode onto the battlefield with his blonde burden casually grasped in one fist.

As one, the shocked citizens of Apokolips discarded their weaponry and knelt before their returned master.

"Welcome home, oh mighty Darkseid," Bernadeth greeted from her prone position on the ground.

"Arise, my children," the tyrant ordered. "Let this meaningless battle for control end."

"Of course, Lord," the obsequious assassin Kanto replied, not wishing to be outspoken by his female analog. "We had thought ourselves bereft forever."

"Only the slimmest of chances has allowed me to overcome my death at the hands of Superman," the gray-skinned behemoth admitted. "But let the universe howl in despair, for I have returned!"

Amidst the cheering of his troops, Bernadeth bowed low and asked, "What is your will, My Lord?"

"As ever, to search for the Anti-Life Equation so that I might bring order to this aimless universe... But first, Superman must suffer for killing me. His adopted world will die screaming. Only then will I seek the ultimate end."

"Forgive me, Lord," Kanto voiced, "but an attack on Earth will violate your pact with Highfather. New Genesis will doubtless retaliate."

Darkseid smiled maliciously. "Where do you think I'm going next?"

"And the girl, My Lord?" Bernadeth inquired hesitantly while looking at the female metahuman in Darkseid's grasp.

"Summon Desaad," the tyrant ordered before throwing the unconscious Supergirl at Bernadeth's feet. If possible, his smile grew even more vicious. "I have the specimen that he's been waiting for since our last excursion to Earth."

The Female Fury smiled darkly.

A/N: As promised, here's the 14,300-word update. I apologize for the abnormally long delay, but real life has required most of my time of late. I have a complete outline for the second half of this chapter—in fact, I've got a good portion of it written already. With luck, the remaining couple of chapters will follow with less of a delay.

I worked a few omakes into this chapter, most noticeably the remaining portion of the Death Convention and the Threesome Wedding by Ben Sheahan; When the Four Strike by Luinlothana; and Early Dawn, Bored. Bored. Really Bored, and Dawn and Dr. Light by Chris Hill.

Many thanks to James and Chris for proofreading this chapter, and to all the CaerAzkaban group members whose suggestions appear in this update.

Thank you for your interest, and please remember to review.

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Chapter 18: ...And Let Slip the Dogs of War by Overkill

Next Chapter

Disclaimer: This is a cross between JLA (Season 5) and Rorschach's Blot's Make A Wish Story. Harry Potter is owned by JK Rowling and various publishers. Henchgirl, The Professor, and other such objects are Rorschach's creation. DC Comics own the Justice League and associated characters/plot devices. The lack of plot, however, can be attributed to me.

...And Let Slip the Dogs of War

Something was wrong.

The plan had been going smoothly—at least as far as the entity could tell. Events were unfolding exactly as predicted, the main players were fulfilling their destinies precisely as they were supposed to, and the ultimate resolution was proceeding as intended.

And then the metaphorical wheel came loose, sending eons of meticulous plans careening completely out of control.

Some unknown factor had not been considered, and the ensuing ripple effects were affecting the final design. If the reactive element were not neutralized, the reconciliation planned since the beginning could potentially be delayed—and that was the best case scenario.

And yet, with all the elements in such a state of flux, the fragile web could ill afford any further direct intervention. The end results were unclear, but would mostly like not be agreeable in the slightest.

Only one fact remained certain. All of the participants were still near their designated positions. The reconciliation would occur.

Whether the settlement would ultimately follow its proscribed route, however, not even the Source knew.

"So, you must be Duh-sad," Kara taunted once she awoke to find herself restrained in an Apokolips interrogation chamber.

"It's 'Desaad'," the craven scientist asserted sharply as her barb tore his attention from his console.

Several of the oddly dressed women spread around the chamber seemed to prefer Supergirl's rendition, however, if their poorly-concealed smiles were any indication.

"Whatever," the blonde woman casually dismissed before testing her bonds again. "And just so you know, I don't usually do this sort of thing on a first date." After her conventional attempts to free herself failed, Kara attempted to use her Heat vision to sever her restraints. Unfortunately, that tactic failed as well, the twin crimson laser beams rebounding off the metallic fetters before the ricochet was consumed by an energy field surrounding her 'bed'. "Ya know, Duh-Sad, this... game... really isn't my thing, and I've already got a boyfriend to play it with if it was."

The short, robed figure smiled maliciously. "Jest while you can, Kryptonian," he advised while placing a strange-looking helmet on her head. "You'll soon be singing a very different tune."

Kara rolled her eyes. "I'm an Argosian, you Nitwit," she grumbled. "My home planet's name is Argo, not Krypton. If you're going to threaten me, you could at least do it correctly."

Desaad stomped back to his computer terminal. "How's this for a threat?" the Apokolips resident demanded. "As soon as I press this button, your entire consciousness will be subsumed by a construct of my own design. Perhaps you will be more congenial once you can think nothing more or less than what I tell you to."

"I'm guess that's about the only way a girl'd ever pay attention to you," she insulted cheerfully.

The gathered Furies did not even attempt to hide their mirth at that barb, choosing instead to openly laugh at the offended scientist.

Sending another glare at his infuriating captive, Desaad activated the mental conditioning probe and waited for the screams that would soon follow.

It would prove to be a long wait.

"You know, I do have other things to do today," Kara yawned, exaggerating a feeling of complete boredom. "If you're going to torture me, would you mind getting with the program?"

"I'm impressed, Desaad," Lashina admitted sarcastically as the man fidgeted over the terminal's connections. "What do you do after you lull the prisoners to sleep?"

The man's rapidly blinking stare re-surveyed the completely functional equipment. "I don't understand... everything checks out perfectly! She must be blocking the probe somehow."

Kara smiled as she suddenly realized that one of the 'features' of her outfit that Joe gave her for her birthday must be responsible for the failed cerebral attack.

"What's the matter?" she asked innocently. "Forget to pay your power bill or something?"

"Never fear," the scientist assured his disapproving audience, "I can simply amplify the signal." After several adjustments to the control panel, Desaad looked back to Kara's restrained form on the inclined table. "This will break through whatever meager defenses you managed to pull together."

The blonde woman shrugged as well as she could from her shackles before smiling in a teasing fashion. "I wouldn't bet on it."

Desaad threw the switch, causing the machine to reactivate with a much louder background noise.

Supergirl sighed in an over-the-top manner. "Are you sure you know what you're doing?" she demanded.

The probe's hum grew more pronounced before sparks began fly from the electrical connections. Before he could react, the machine self-destructed with a remarkable explosion.

"Guess not," Kara answered herself with a grin.

The Doctor was carefully re-reading Merlin's journal as she made feverish notes with her unoccupied hand. Though the hypothesis was incomplete, the wizard's disjointed prose had sparked an idea in

the back of her mind that had haunted the witch for weeks. Provided that the notes were accurate, she believed that the Flammels' alchemic formula could actually be refined for even greater potency—to say nothing of the potential results regarding the stone's improved longevity. With visions of guest-speaking invitations at the next Wizarding Medical Association meeting, Doctor reached for another sheet of parchment on the table in front of her—

—only to snatch her hand back quickly as a body appeared in mid-air and landed atop her work table.

"Why do I have this sudden suspicion that Mr. Black is somehow responsible for this?" Doctor asked the unconscious blonde woman. Withdrawing her wand, the witch proceeded to cast several diagnostic charms on her unscheduled patient. "Now, let's see... breathing's normal... heartbeat's accelerated slightly above human norm, but still okay... no serious physical wounds... And you're wearing some of our armor?" the witch continued her diagnosis aloud. "I guess Harry really does know you, then."

Exploring her patient's condition further, Doctor began testing the other female for magical residue.

"Hmm... no signs of hexes or curses... that's odd, some sort of Portkey? Enough of one to trigger your clothes' emergency Portkey redirection charms, anyway." The mediwitch shrugged. "Well, whoever you are, it seems safe enough to wake you. Enervate."

Her patient's eyes twitched briefly before, with a rush of wind, the woman was standing at the other side of the room.

"Where am I?" the new arrival demanded. "Who are you? What do you want?"

Doctor squeezed the bridge of her nose tiredly, before straightening up her disheveled papers that had recently served as the other woman's bedding.

"Let's see. In order: Black Island, you may call me Doctor, and I want to know what caused you to pop into my laboratory."

"Black Island?"

"Yes, home of several endangered or misunderstood magical species, a large group of inventive crackpots, and myself," Doctor answered. "Oh, and Mr. Black as well—when he isn't wandering into other peoples dimensions, realities and whatnot."

"This is Joe's place?"

The witch frowned. "Joe? Who's Joe?"

"I meant Mr. Black."

"It is," the mediwitch replied. A heartbeat later, she smilingly asked, "You call him 'Joe'?"

"Kara started it," the other woman maturely defended.

The mediwitch frowned in confusion. "From Mr. Black's description, I thought that you might be Kara. If you're not her, then who are you?"

"Oh, I'm her... sister... Galatea," the blonde metahuman introduced herself, "and I really need to get back to my world... universe... whatever."

In the dead of space, Metron pondered the nature of the inevitable.

The chronicler had been around since the First World—as it was now called—but it was not until the relatively recent creation of the Fourth World that he even knew something had gone amiss. It was this confusion that led to his vow of neutrality, as well as his quest to explain the variation. He had long suspected that the Anti-Life Equation was responsible for the flawed Fourth World, but cryptic clues gleaned from the Source led him to suspect that such was not the case.

In any event, his travels across the myriad paths of infinity were not wholly without results. With much effort, the supposed New God had obtained a tiny remnant of the Anti-Life Equation. While hardly powerful in and of itself, Metron hoped to use the fragment as a key to understand the greater mystery.

To that end, he had secreted the Equation's fragment within a Mother Box that was, in turn, concealed behind the Source Wall.

With his only gambit employed, Metron began his vigil to draw out the Anti-Life Equation, or to at least divine its fate. When others began seeking his prize, the chronicler added those individuals to his surveillance agenda.

Metron huffed in resigned amusement. "And all for naught," he admitted aloud. After all his many attempts to question the Source, the ancient entity finally revealed a small portion of the ever-deepening mystery.

And then sought compensation by issuing his current task.

Tiredly, Metron massaged his temples.

Why, in the Source's name, did Mr. Black have to visit his reality?

"Okay, Cerberus," Harry addressed the large, three-headed dog as the two—or four, depending on one's point of view—appeared in the middle of the street outside of the Justice League's Metro Tower. "Let's get you some lunch, and then we'll see about getting B'Wanna Beast or Vixen to dog-sit you. If I remember right, they're both down here today."

The canine whined piteously.

"Yes, I know that there was plenty for you to chew on back there," the wizard admitted, "but it's best that you not gnaw on my colleagues—bad politics, you understand. Besides, you don't know where they've been."

Three giant heads grumbled in begrudged agreement.

Harry shook his head at Hades' idea of a 'peace offering'. "Now, let's see what we can—"

Cerberus suddenly growled, redirecting his owner's attention to the sickly yellow bubble rapidly descending from orbit. It seemed to almost be on a collision course with the Metro Tower.

"Good eyes, Boy," Harry praised. Once he realized exactly who was inside the hard light construct, the wizard smiled darkly. "Let's go say hello."

Activating his coat's Fidelius-powered stealth feature, the magician Apparated inside of the downward-moving structure and proceeded to Stun and disarm the unsuspecting villains. Once the crimson light of the Stunning Hex collided with the yellow ring bearer Sinestro, however, the spherical battleground dissolved.

"Oops," Harry muttered to himself before casting his own flight charm and chasing after the unconscious criminals, who were rapidly speeding towards the ground and their imminent deaths. Fortunately for the individuals in question, the one-time Gryffindor Seeker was more than capable of retrieving them.

As the wizard noticed the baldhead of one captive, however, he smiled darkly. "Hello, Lex Luthor. I do believe that I promised to kill you when next we met. I look forward to proving that I'm not a liar."

As Harry lowered the group to the ground, he seized an odd box clipped to Luthor's belt and began mentally cataloging the other confiscated items.

"Hmm... this has some promise," he muttered as he placed the strange device on his own belt before inspecting a sickly yellow ring and a deep purple sapphire. "These could prove handy, too..."

He blinked owlishly as the two crystalline objects melted in his palm, before merging into a single molten puddle. "Err... were they supposed to do that?" he absently inquired.

Without warning, the puddle retracted into itself, leaving behind two black crystalline rings. The larger of the pair seemed the same size as his current onyx ring he... inherited... and bore a lightning bolt crest. In contrast, the smaller ring appeared much more delicate and possessed the 'House of El' shield upon its face.

Using his free hand to scratch his head in confusion, Harry pocketed the apparent result of accidental magic and resolved to ask Kara about them later.

"Henchgirl! Professor! Come over here!" the Doctor yelled from the door to the laboratory.

"Whatever the Veela have done now, Pencil will just have to handle it himself—I don't care how uncomfortable they make him. I've got to

finish this project for Mr. Black!" Henchgirl called out tiredly as she worked over a glowing circuit board on the table before her.

"That's why I know you'll want to meet my new friend here," the mediwitch insisted.

"Fine," the inventor grumbled. "Don't connect that line, Professor!" she shouted to the other side of an ornate mirror surrounded by other large pieces of equipment. At his equally vocal response, the blonde witch approached the two new arrivals.

"In case you didn't notice, we're pretty busy working the kinks out of the new prototype. We've installed a power regulator to allow for magical people, but it still goes into meltdown whenever we power up the thing. What's so urgent, Doctor?"

"Henchgirl, meet Galatea. She's Kara's sister that Mr. Black was telling us about." Turning to the metahuman, Doctor added, "Galatea, this is Henchgirl—one of our chief inventors, Potions Mistress, and Mr. Black's other sister."

The displaced Argosian clone smiled. "I'm sorry to meet you under these circumstances, but it's urgent that I get back to my dimension. There's a very evil man who's somehow come back to life, apparently kidnapped Kara, and probably's going to attack the Earth. I need to get back and warn them."

"I can Floo Mr. Black, Pamela, or one of the kids—they can sound the alarm," Henchgirl said distractedly. "Umm... what are the chances that Mr. Black's not found out about the Kara-gone-missing thing yet?"

Galatea looked at her watch. "Beats me," she admitted, "but I wouldn't bet against him knowing by now."

Doctor and Henchgirl looked at each other in growing alarm.

Noticing the look, the white-clad blonde asked, "What's the big deal? Joe handles this sort of thing all the time, right? I mean, just last week he single-handedly beat up a couple of Greek gods and turned back their entire demonic army."

"WHAT!" Henchgirl bellowed wildly. "HE KNOWS BETTER THAN TO DO SOMETHING SO... SO..."

"Gryffindorish?" the Professor offered. "Brave? Heroic?"

"SO STUPIDLY HEROIC!" the inventive witch continued to rant as Doctor eased her wand out of her sleeve. "WHEN I GET MY HANDS ON HIM, I'M GONNA... tell him that he doesn't always have to save everyone himself."

Sighing in relief as her Calming Charm took effect, Doctor stowed her wand back up her robe sleeve.

"Thanks, I needed that," Henchgirl admitted.

"Any time," the Mediwitch promised.

"So... what were we talking about again?"

"Mr. Black fighting the forces of Darkness?" Galatea prompted.

Henchgirl nodded sharply. "Right, then. Unfortunately, Mr. Black does intervene in these sorts of things with alarming regularity... but this time its personal," Henchgirl explained. After a moment's hesitation, she further confided, "The last time a Dark Lord captured someone that Mr. Black cared for... he sort of... overreacted. It wasn't pretty. We almost lost him—not to the dark git, but to Mr. Black's own dark side. Now, after all he's been through... if Kara's hurt... look, we just need to get to him before he does something we'll all regret."

"Maybe someone can calm him down before he overreacts," Doctor suggested hopefully. "He's made friends in that dimension, right?"

Henchgirl stared blankly at her colleague for several moments.

"Right, I'll just Floo Mr. Black, then," Doctor announced contritely.

The potions mistress nodded sharply in agreement before returning to her work with renewed vigor.

Galatea wandered over and inspected the repairs that the other blonde was making. "You've got that diode reversed," she noted almost casually.

"What?" the witch mumbled distractedly.

"That diode-looking object there... in the middle of those two glowing crystal things," the metahuman clarified. "I think that you've got its polarities reversed. If those magical doohickeys behave like regular power sources, then the way you've got these other components would—"

"—bypass the power regulator, sending a feedback surge through the tachyon capacitor!" Henchgirl finished excitedly. "You may just be on to something, Galatea!" The witch waved her wand over the circuit and the components in question rearranged themselves. Installing the modified part back into an open portion of the mirror's frame, she called out, "Okay, Professor, try it now!"

"Contact!" the wizard yelled as the glass turned several different colors before settling on a rippling light blue.

"Initiating diagnostics!" Henchgirl called out as she performed several checks on the new upgrade. "I think that's done it!"

"It's alive, Henchgirl!" the Professor cackled as he darted around from behind the odd device. "It's alive!"

"Ignore the troll," the Potions mistress advised dryly as she slapped the short man in the back of the head, "we all do."

"Ow!" the Professor complained. "What was that for?"

"For messing up such a simple circuit and banishing Mr. Black to another dimension for the past several months," the witch explained calmly.

The absent-minded wizard nodded slowly. "Oh... right. That."

"Yes, that!" Henchgirl spat before slapping him again. Turning back to the other blonde, she added, "Tell me, Galatea... how would you like a job?"

One of the Metrotower's attendants ran noisily into the monitoring room. "Superman!" the man shouted. "You'd better get outside quick!"

The Kryptonian complied, alongside several other League members. Much to their shock, upon the Metrotower's steps were a good percentage of their various rogues' galleries. Such a turn of events was certainly out of the ordinary, but the truly surprising aspect was the giant, three-headed dog standing guard over the unconscious group.

Normally, such a scene would immediately spark a frenzied investigation into how such an event occurred. The Justice League, however, was far too experienced to react in such a manner.

The fact that Mr. Black was calmly standing next to the aforementioned canine while talking into his cigarette lighter helped to fill in a few blanks as well.

After an expedient, nominating shove forward from Diana, Superman approached the other man cautiously. "Uhh... Mr. Black? May I ask what happened?" he asked while staring at the drooling body of Lex Luthor in disgusted fascination.

Harry put away his lighter abruptly. "This lot was flying right for the Metro tower, so I took the precaution of Stunning them for interrogation."

Diana strode forward and frowned at the unconscious captives. "I wonder why they were heading here..."

"I'm more concerned right now with where they just left," Harry replied, before looking directly at Clark. "Darkseid's back."

"What!"

"Somehow, Darkseid has been resurrected," Harry supplied. "Kara and Galatea drifted a little too close to Apokolips on their return flight, and were attacked by him and their ship was destroyed. From what I gather, Darkseid hit Tea with his Omega Beams, but my protections on her uniform sent her to my island, instead."

Harry took a deep breath. "It's unclear whether Kara escaped and is simply unable to contact us, or if she was captured. I was just preparing to search for her when this bunch popped in for a visit."

"We've been keeping a close eye on Apokolips for years now!" Clark protested. "If Darkseid's returned, he must have done so very recently."

Batman stared at the unconscious group for a few moments in thought. "The timing is rather suspicious. Roughly fifty percent of our combined Rogues' galleries look like they've just escaped a war zone and seek us out? We need more information."

The Man of Steel knelt down and seized Luthor's shirt in one clenched fist. "Let's start the interrogations with this one."

Harry quickly weighed his options. He could either take Mortis out to the attack site—whose coordinates Galatea could only approximate—or gamble that the criminals laying at his feet could provide him with more useful information.

Hoping that Kara could wait a few moments more, Harry withdrew a small bottle filled with Veritaserum from Henchgirl's travel pack.

"Open his mouth," the wizard ordered grimly.

Darkseid was, in a word, pleased. Not only had he been resurrected by a wandering band of humans, but the Universe itself welcomed him back to life with the means of destroying that detested Superman. Once his newest Fury had been properly... molded... he would use the girl-child to spread death and destruction upon the Terran home world. This planet Earth was the center of far too many cosmic events to remain outside of his control.

The dictator smiled as his mind returned to comforting thoughts of Superman's pending humiliation and eventual destruction. With his new Fury clearing his path to Metropolis, the so-called "Man of Steel" would either be destroyed by the girl's unwilling hand, or destroy himself in the act of taking the female's life. Either way, the Kryptonian would certainly be weakened enough to succumb to his Omega Beams.

Yes, the future of his empire was bright indeed. And once the rabble was sufficiently tamed, he could finally learn the Anti-Life Equation and bring order to the otherwise chaotic universe.

"Hello, Darkseid," a dry, emotionless voice interrupted his private musings. "Welcome back to the realm of the living."

"Metron," the New God grunted irritably. "What do you want now?"

The oddly dressed man hovered closer in his Mobius chair. "As ever, I endeavor towards the pursuit of knowledge," the other deity admitted. "Apropos, I thought you should know that your recent... actions... may have long-term consequences—both for you and your people."

Darkseid stared at the seated busybody before chuckling derisively. "Are you finally joining a side, Metron?"

The entity folded his hands together and rested his head atop them. "Nothing quite as drastic as that, Uxas. As you well know, I remain neutral in these matters. I simply came to give you fair warning and advice, as always."

The dark being laughed at the prissy chastisement. "Very well, then. Since you speak nothing but the truth and desire only knowledge, tell me your warning."

The white-haired figure reclined in his hovering throne-chair. "As we speak, there are events unfolding on the human planet known as Earth, events which are both disruptive and unexpected. And at their source is a single being, an entity personifying the 'Anti-Life Equation' in all its known forms."

The chronicler held up one hand in warning at the covetous look that fell across Darkseid's face.

"Be warned, however. The actions you have taken this day have earned you a most relentless and terrifying enemy. He gathers information on your strengths and weaknesses even now, and he will soon descend upon this world without hesitation or mercy. If you value your life, or those of your people, I would advise you and your hosts to withdraw far from here. He seeks that which you have stolen from him, and he will destroy all that would block his path."

For the first time since he had been resurrected, the iron-fisted ruler of Apokolips laughed. "And what property have I supposedly seized? What mere physical object could possibly hold any meaning to such an entity?"

"He seeks the girl," Metron announced gravely. "I believe that he has grown fond of the Argosian, and has bestowed her with certain protections to defeat precisely what you are attempting to do."

The wielder of the Omega Effect stared at his 'guest' for several moments. "Leave," the dictator finally ordered, "I will take this under advisement."

Metron bowed his head. "I pray that you do, Darkseid... for all our sakes."

"Okay, that should do it," Galatea announced as she fastened the last panel on the duplicate machine that the Argosian had helped assemble at superhuman speeds. "Try it now."

The Professor cackled madly and reached for the activation controls—that is, until a white blur tackled him away from the critical system, leaving him suspended from a coat hook on the far opposing wall. A second blur left Galatea once again standing next to Henchgirl, except this time she was brushing her hands off in a satisfied manner.

Feeling the collective gazes of the room's other occupants, the metahuman shrugged her shoulders. "What? Joe needs help, and you said that the midget's responsible for fragging the last several prototypes."

Henchgirl and Doctor glanced at each other and smiled, before returning their attention to their guest.

"You know, I think that you'll fit in our little family just fine," Doctor announced while her fellow witch beamed happily at gaining a new partner-in-cri—err... research assistant.

"ello, 'enchgirl!" an accented voice called out from the doorway. "'enchgirl, are you 'ere?"

The Potions mistress pinched the bridge of her nose as a flock of Veela strolled impudently into her laboratory. "What now?" she demanded resignedly.

The apparent leader of the group strode up to the control panel. "We wanted to know if t'ere was any new information on Meester Black," the lead Veela announced.

"Who are you?" Galatea asked curiously at witnessing the group's collective eagerness for a response to their query.

"My name ees Adrienne," the accented blonde replied, barely sparing the Argosian notice before returning her gaze to the female inventor. "Now, 'as t'ere been any word from t'ees... other dimension?"

In turn, Henggirl pointed at the extraterrestrial. "She just came from there."

"Merveilleux!" the Veela cheered happily. "So, t'ees machine... it works both ways then, yes?"

"That's what I was trying to establish!" the Professor grumbled from his elevated position atop the coat hook. "Apparently, Mr. Black was ultimately responsible for sending this girl here."

Sighed comments of "très romantique" could be heard from the predominately French crowd.

Glaring at the group and wishing fervently that they would depart, Henggirl grumpily added, "There's a war brewing over there, you see, and Mr. Black is right in the middle of it!"

The group huddled inward, and the others caught only garbled pieces of the rapid exchanges.

"We understand," Adrienne admitted moments later on behalf of the group. "We will see to our own business, and let you finish without further interruption. Dames," she ordered while turning to face the other Veela, "Allons-y!"

As the group of exotic women filed orderly out of the laboratory, the remaining occupants looked at each other curiously.

"Where do you think they're going?" Doctor suddenly asked.

Henchgirl simply shook her head. "I have no idea." Putting the extremely un-Veela-like reaction from her mind, the witch directed her attention on to more important matters.

"Okay, Galatea, let's test the bidirectional communication between the two mirrors. Doctor, do you have Fluffy?"

In response, the mediwitch held up a disheveled housecat. If one were to describe the expression on the feline's face, such adjectives as 'resigned' would spring to mind.

"Excellent!" the Potions Mistress cackled.

"Are you done yet?" Kara resignedly called out to the now extremely-agitated technician.

Turning around, Desaad threw what appeared to be a spanner wrench at the restrained blonde. "Do you ever shut up?" he demanded in a shriek.

"Umm... no," the Argosian informed the man. "By the way, you dropped your wrench."

Desaad turned back to his latest attempt at retrieving information and blatantly ignored her.

"Hey, you mind letting me go for a couple minutes? I really need to go to the bathroom."

The inventor's silence was Kara's only reply.

"This is the song that never ends! It goes on and—"

"Gah!" Desaad yelled, before repeating clubbing his equipment with a heavy hand tool. "Be silent!"

Turning to Lashina as best as her restraints would allow, Supergirl asked, "So, how does this work, exactly? You gonna bore me to death, or what?"

Her answer came in the form of a man standing at ease upon a hovering disk.

"What is your status, Desaad?" Darkseid demanded immediately.

"Well, my lord," the obsequious underling began, "I have successfully—"

Kara interrupted, "—broken twenty seven mind probes, sixteen hypnosis machines, forty five different power tools... and the record for 'most incompetent bad guy ever'."

The Apokolips' ruler looked at Desaad threateningly. "Explain."

"S-she possesses some sort of telepathic-shielding device, my Lord," Desaad stammered. "I have not quite located it as yet but, rest assured—"

"Then remove her garments and destroy the device. My plans are too important to be delayed by such simple trickery."

The scientist wrung his hands nervously. "M-my Lord, the thing is... I—we!—are unable to... disrobe her. At all."

The room's attention directed itself to Kara, who shrugged as best she could given her restrained state. "What can I say? My boyfriend doesn't like to share."

The hulking dictator turned his crimson eyes on the cringing underling. "You try my patience, Desaad."

"I-I will neutralize the device, O Mighty Darkseid. I need only a few more moments of preparation to implement your plan."

"You had best not fail me again, Desaad," Darkseid announced, "for your sake." Turning to address the other women present, the dictator ordered, "My Furies, go forth and lead the advance troops. Once they are engaged in battle, seek out the Kryptonian." The megalomaniac smiled grimly. "After all, I'm sure that he'd be interested in our guest's presence here."

"Yes, my Lord," Granny Goodness bowed before leading the rest of the native femme fatales out of the dungeon.

"You know, your flunkies haven't been very forthcoming with the details," Kara announced. "I've figured out that you're planning to invade the Earth—even though Superman kicked your butt the last two times you tried. What I can't figure out is why you're keeping me here. You went through an awful lot of trouble just to use me for bait."

"I would have thought it obvious," Darkseid replied disdainfully. "I originally intended to use you to keep Superman busy while I conquered the Earth. Then, assuming you had survived the assault, I would have repeated the process on New Genesis before resuming my search for the Anti-Life Equation. But now, Fate has once again delivered me a boon. There is no need for me to seek the Anti-Life Equation, not when I'm holding the one thing it desires most in the entire Universe."

Kara smiled nervously. "The 'Anti-Life Equation', huh?"

"The source of absolute power over all living things," he explained smugly. "With it, I will dominate the will of all sentient races."

"And how, exactly, do you plan to control such a force?" the Argosian queried. "According to what you just said, it would have complete control over you as well."

"Perhaps it would have... once," Darkseid allowed, "but I know its weakness. All I have to do to control the Anti-Life Equation... is to control you."

"W-what?" Kara demanded fearfully.

Ignoring her, Darkseid addressed his remaining minion. "Desaad, I must have what knowledge this female contains. The Anti-Life Equation has taken on flesh, and this child knows its face and name. I must have this information immediately!"

"O-of course, Sire," the torturer simpered, "I will extract the data you have commanded at once!"

"You had better," Darkseid threatened darkly as he floated out of the laboratory.

After Luthor's involuntary confession regarding Darkseid's resurrection—and, more importantly, the tyrant's stated goal of attacking the Earth once more—the Justice League members stared at each other.

"What is the chance that this is misinformation?" Batman finally asked.

"None," Harry answered grimly. "He had no choice but to be completely truthful about everything we were told. Darkseid is coming—all that remains is to notify everyone to help roll out the welcome mat. And while we're on that topic..."

The wizard quickly cast a group of Messenger spells, the luminescent stags immediately dashing off to their recipients.

"What in the world were those," Flash inquired with an amazed tone, "and where can I get one?"

Harry smiled slightly. "Those were... guardian spirits, I guess you could say. I gave them messages to deliver to a few friends, advising them of what we just learned."

"Cool!" the World's Fastest Man exclaimed. "We'd better do the same thing, though. Let everyone know what's comin—"

"Watchtower to Metrotower," a male voice interrupted, "we've got a situation!"

Superman turned his attention away from the captives and focused on the large communications display. "What's going on up there?"

"Multiple hyper spatial incursions," Mr. Terrific's voice announced, "but they're planet side. I'm sending telemetry."

Batman gave the displays a cursory glance. "Boomtubes," he grunted in response.

Superman nodded in agreement. "He's right. Can you hear it? Like thunder?"

Mr. Terrific began typing rapidly, display real-time video feeds from relay satellites scattered around the world.

"Good Lord!" the Green Lantern swore. "They're everywhere! Tokyo... London... Washington D.C.—"

A sudden and overbearing clap of thunder erupted over their heads.

"—and right outside our doorstep!" Batman perfunctorily announced before the League personnel rushed en masse to the exits.

Harry, however, had several advantages in such situations—namely, the abilities to Apparate and walk through walls. Therefore, it was no surprise that he tied with Flash for first place in the race to depart the Metrotower. As the other costumed heroes joined them, a strange portal opened across the street and disgorged several strange-appearing female figures.

"Well, this isn't good," the Fastest Man Alive announced in a disheartened tone.

Diana glared at the latest group of intruders. "You harpies made a big mistake coming here!" she exclaimed.

"Now, that's no way to talk to Granny, my little pumpkin," the squat, wizened form of Granny Goodness cackled.

Superman strode to the head of the group. "You may as well surrender," he advised the Apokoliptian shock troops confidently. "You've tried this before, and it didn't work out all that well for you the last time."

"Yes, but we weren't holding a certain something to ensure your good behavior the last time, you naughty boy!" the gray-haired harridan chided madly.

The huddled Justice League members began shivering as the rather comfortable fall temperature suddenly dropped to Arctic conditions.

"Where is Supergirl?" Harry quietly demanded.

"Aww!" the feral female mock-whined. "He figured it out already!"

The leather-clad Stompa snorted. "Well, ain't that a real kick in the pants?"

The wizard's fists instinctively contracted, the suddenly-pressured joints cracking audibly. "Tell. Me. NOW!" he growled.

In reply, a bandaged girl held out a Motherbox, which then projected a video recording of Kara attached to a laboratory table. Moments later, the image was replaced with Darkseid's visage.

"You are the Anti-Life Entity?" the tyrant inquired uncertainly.

"It's Death, you pathetic excuse for an Inferi!" Harry retorted coldly. "Now, release Supergirl unharmed and I promise to make your second demise quick and relatively painless."

"How droll," Darkseid commented. "If you want this female unmolested, you have only to surrender your power to me, and I'll release her."

"Oh?" Harry asked softly, as his eyes swiftly gleaned a dozen details of the broadcasted background as his hand discretely retrieved an item from his pocket. "Is that so?"

And then he smiled darkly, before using the compiled mental imagery as the destination of a slyly placed Black Hole. Upon visual confirmation of the portal creation's success, Harry reached through the magical construct and grasped onto the examination table in the televised background. One swift pull was sufficient to return the restrained blonde back to Earth, leaving Darkseid and his lackeys—on both sides of the connection—staring at him dumbly.

"How did you—?" Granny Goodness started to ask.

"Like this," Harry growled, not noticing as his human countenance melted away to reveal a menacing, fanged skeleton.

It was with only the most basic of thoughts when he used his undead speed to cross the short distance between the two groups. Likewise, it was almost by reflex when he batted the Motherbox out of Lashina's hand and seized Stompa's slightly raised leg.

Needless to say, he did not recognize using Re'em-enhanced strength to forcibly remove the aforementioned appendage from the adjacent trunk.

Or its twin.

Similarly, Harry failed to notice seizing the crouching Mad Harriet's energy claws and viciously sinking them into Lashina's stomach.

Or reusing them to identical effect on the feral Apokoliptian herself.

For that matter, the wizard would later be unable to explain how Lashina's steel bands suddenly transformed themselves into a trio of nooses attached to a convenient street lamp.

However, Harry's higher brain functions began reasserting themselves just in time to aid his animalistic side in populating those same nooses.

Grisly task complete, his hybrid-Dark Creature instincts finally settled down slightly, and his enhanced hearing detected Lashina's Motherbox finally striking the pavement just as his hands enveloped either side of the gray-haired head of Granny Goodness.

The entire exchange had taken less than a second.

Granny Goodness, the League's only opponent left standing, attempted to pull away weakly. "W-what are you?"

"VERY... VERY... ANNOYED!" he growled darkly, before a sharp exertion of muscle brought his hands together in a grisly spectacle.

Covered in gore, a still highly agitated Harry dashed over to the confiscated laboratory table. "Are you alright?" the wizard asked Kara as he violently tore away the reinforced restraints.

Wincing slightly, the shorter figure rubbed her wrists and attempted to stand. The attempt was quickly aborted, however, when her footing proved less than reliable. "Just peachy," she muttered as Harry Transfigured the table into something more comfortable and placed her back on it.

"Rest here for a minute," the wizard advised before pulling the scythe from his dragon hide bracer. "This won't take long."

He turned slightly to face the League. "You lot take care of the riff-raff on this end—I'll dispose of the Dark Tosser personally."

The Man of Steel showed signs of objection.

"It's time to face facts, Superman. You're a hero with a world to save; I'm a murdering psychopath with a gift for wanton destruction." Harry smiled darkly. "Let's play to our strengths, shall we? And speaking of which..."

Harry pulled out the Canopic jar that he won off Anubis and cracked open the lid. After the sudden cloud of black sand coalesced into several organized ranks of attentive humanoid infantry, he returned the jar to his pocket.

"Apokolips has invaded the Earth, and the parademons are attacking humanity," the wizard informed them briefly. "I'm going to dispose of their leader. When I return, I expect the threat to be neutralized. Do not, under any circumstances, harm the humans. Am I understood?"

The jackals laid a fist over their hearts in salute.

"Dismissed," Harry ordered, and the Jackal horde burst back into sand before flying off in every direction.

Making a mental note to thank Anubis later, Harry approached his Black Hole before stopping. "Oh, by the way, Galatea's safe and sound with my family. So, don't be surprised if they pop on by for a quick visit. And, Cerberus?" The dog barked attentively. "Be a good hellhound and watch the prisoners for me."

The three-headed dog barked affirmatively.

With his message delivered, one large step through the portal returned Harry to Kara's abductor and his laughable reinforcements.

His sudden arrival sent Kalibak blundering backwards in surprise—before a swift stroke of his scythe permanently rendered the flabbergasted expression upon the now-severed head. Harry then swept the weighted end of his scythe across the room, and the fleeing Desaad was immediately dispatched by the full force of a rage-powered Disembowelment Curse.

Returning the Black Hole to his coat to minimize his quarry's chances of escape, Harry smiled at the still-dumbfounded Darkseid. "By the way, Crater Face. You know that 'quick and relatively painless' bit I promised earlier?"

The enraged wizard smiled widely, displaying his fangs.

"I lied."

Raven excused herself from yet another overly curious Death and made her way back to Grim and Bill.

"This is getting downright weird," the purple-haired girl commented dryly to the pair of skeletons. "I mean, I know that Father has certain notoriety in the mortal realms, but here as well? I mean, you'd think he was a rock star or something!"

"Mister Black is... very complicated," Grim finally admitted. "He's one of dose dat helped out a lotta people over de years, and da boss's made several friends because of dat." The Reaper considered the matter further before adding, "He's made a lotta enemies, too, but 'dey seem to die in 'accidents' before dey can do any'ding."

The Jamaican skeleton was interrupted by a set of invisible bells—which, the girl noticed, was chiming some sort of funeral dirge.

"Oh, goody!" Grim exclaimed. "Dey're going to announce de winners!"

"The winners of what?" Raven demanded as she struggled to keep up with the swiftly running reaper.

Grim glanced at the girl and nearly rolled his eyes at her. Or, at least he would have if she weren't his boss's daughter. And if he had eyes to roll. Which he didn't.

"De contest, of course!"

At witnessing Raven's ominous glare and finding it uncomfortably similar to that of his own granddaughter, Bill volunteered some additional information as they hurried towards the auditorium. "AT

EACH CENTENNIAL CONVENTION, WE GIVE AN AWARD FOR CERTAIN EVENTS—LIKE THE MOST UNUSUAL SOUL REAPING, OR MOST SOULS GATHERED ON A SINGLE COLLECTION." The reverberating voice seemed to dim slightly in pitch and almost grumbled, "ANUBIS IS EXPECTED TO MAKE A SWEEP THIS CENTURY, DUE TO SOME EVENTS IN HAMUNAPTRA AND AHM SHERE SOME SEVEN DECADES AGO."

The girl nodded, and then looked around at the milling crowd. "I still don't see Father anywhere," she noted.

"Ah, I'm sure he'll be fine," Grim replied. "He'll be here before you know it."

Raven looked unconvinced, but kept her misgivings to herself.

Once all the Union members had found seats, their Māori host appeared on the stage and began her introductory speech—leaving Raven to wonder exactly what was keeping her father.

The tall figure garbed in a purple robe smiled slightly as he scribbled a few notes into his ever-present book.

"Eons of work now have to be reconsidered because of you," the man noted in a detached manner. "I wonder... Do you even care that a perfectly ordered system now lies in ruins because of you? That the fates of millions have been irrevocably altered due to your intervention, to those you inspire to embrace freedom and eventual Chaos? If things continue upon this disordered path that you have chosen, the very fabric of the Multiverse might unravel."

The blind entity made another alteration to the Cosmic Log chained to his right wrist. "Control must be regained and, since you are the party responsible, you shall be the one charged to correct the matter."

The eldest of the Endless laid his Book down and reclined in his chair. Smiling as he sensed his manipulations begin to filter through the fabric of reality, the robed being calmly offered one final rhetorical question.

"Tell me, Mr. Black. Do you believe in Destiny now?"

Darkseid grunted as his assailant, the supposed Anti-Life Entity, slammed him into the ground again.

"On your feet!" Harry growled. "You're not escaping me that easily!"

Slowly reaching towards his belt, the dictator grunted in exertion and threw a device in the vengeful wizard's direction.

With a snort, the wizard Banished what appeared to be an electrified net back at his victim... err, opponent.

"Huh," Harry huffed in wonder as the New God immediately fell back to the floor, writhing in agony. "A Cruciatus net...?"

The corners of his mouth started creeping upwards again.

"How... interesting."

Despite the pained groans and grunts of despair, the dark god managed to destroy the device with a burst of Omega Beams.

Frowning slightly at the lost toy, Harry swept forward and kicked the recumbent dictator in the head. "You know, you seem awfully attached to those eyes."

Harry suddenly smiled menacingly.

"I hope you don't mind if I change that."

Darkseid bellowed in pain as the solid red orbs were ruthlessly Summoned out of his head.

"Let's have another round of applause for Samael, the winner of this century's 'Most Souls Seduced to a Premature Demise' award!" Hine-nui-te-pō called. After her Talmudic associate vacated the stage, the Polynesian deity scanned her list and continued. "All right, everyone. Our next area of competition is the coveted 'Most Souls Collected in a Single Day' award."

"HERE IT COMES," Bill somehow managed to mutter as the jackal god Anubis straightened in his seat.

"The competition was fierce this century," their host continued, "but after careful consideration, our panel of judges has decided—"

The chamber doors opening violently, which both interrupted Hine-nui-te-pō and announced the new arrival to the hall. The entrant—a skeleton in a business suit—rushed to the stage and whispered something to the Mistress of Ceremonies.

"Of course," her magically amplified reply echoed around the auditorium, "bring them in at once!" Addressing the crowd again, she continued, "Ladies and Gentle-Deaths, I apologize for the interruption, but I have just been informed that there is a rather... interesting broadcast on the PNN."

Several of the animated skeleton attendants quickly set up large television screens on the auditorium's stage.

"For those of you just joining us," the television announcer commented, "there is a late-breaking development in the mortal realm. It seems that the most recent wielder of the fabled Omega Force, King Uxas of Apokolips—whom most would recognize as the tyrant Darkseid—has been somehow resurrected without authorization and has renewed hostilities against the Terran home world. We have learned that this particular dimension is also the latest stop on Mr. Black's 'vacation'. Those of you familiar with this entity will recall exactly what sort of occurrences take place during these 'vacations'. Upon learning of Darkseid's return to power, Mr. Black had this to say. I warn you, however, that the following footage may not be suitable for deities under level two."

After the grisly altercation had played, the news anchor reappeared on the screen. "As you just witnessed, this 'Supergirl'—whom we have since determined to be Mr. Black's acknowledged Death Maid—has been abducted by Darkseid. In return, Mr. Black has declared war on the entire Apokolips system, as well as its resident pantheon of New Gods. It remains to be seen if Mr. Black will be called into account on this blatant misuse of—"

The announcer suddenly stopped speaking, and the murmur of someone speaking off-camera was heard. "What did you just say?"

More muttering could be detected in the background.

"How is that even possible?" the announcer demanded shrilly.

The low-pitched drone grew more insistent.

"Ladies and Gentle-Deaths, there has been a sudden and unexpected development in this incident. A new prophecy—apparently concealed from detection since its creation countless ages past—has just been discovered in our archives. I am told that this particular account has been authenticated as originating from the Cosmic Log itself which, of course, contains all past, present, and future events."

The announcer loosened his necktie and took several preparatory breaths. "This document foretells the return of an ancient cosmic entity, thought lost to this particular dimension since the war of the old gods. The being is known by many names... 'The Beast of Judgment' is one such title, as is 'The Dark at the End of Everything'. Be advised, the ender of universes, gods, and worlds—of everything—has returned from the obscurity of the ages."

The announcer swallowed carefully.

"Once known as the Anti-Life Entity, it now calls itself by a new name—Mr. Black. And Mr. Black is most assuredly not happy."

After a slight hesitation, the broadcaster continued. "For the duration of this conflict, the planets of Earth and Apokolips have been declared unsafe for all entities not classified as Level One Unlimited. We will, of course, continue broadcasting coverage of this intergalactic war—just as soon as our remote crew has received a change of undergarments. As for this reporter... I'm getting a drink. Good evening and goodbye! "

Raven turned and glared at Grim. "He'll be fine, huh?"

Grim scratched the back of his skull sheepishly while Bill stared at his feet. "Well... technically, he is still perfectly fine," the Jamaican reaper attempted to explain.

The sudden appearance of a silvery stag cut off the teenage girl's inquisition. Trotting up to the young witch, the Patronus opened its mouth and—surprisingly—began to speak.

"Raven," Harry's voice emitted from the magical construct, "in case you haven't heard, someone resurrected Darkseid and he somehow managed to kidnap Kara. I'm going to save her, and then kill Darkseid and his minions. Please stay there and I'll be back to get you just as soon as I finish killing off what's left of the Apokoliptian army. Oh, and if the Black Racer is there—he's the prat with the skis, by the way—tell him that I've got a bone to pick with him about how Darkseid's soul escaped from Hadis under his watch. You might let him know that I'll be most... displeased... if I have to go looking for him. Stay safe, and I'll be with you soon."

Its message delivered, the stag disappeared.

The purple-haired witch growled. "Well, what are two you waiting for? Let's go, already!"

"Go where?" the Grim Reaper asked nervously—while discretely moving his scythe between himself and the teenager.

"To Earth, or wherever Father is at the moment."

"AH, YES, ABOUT THAT," Bill began.

"You see, Mr. Black is a very busy... very scary man," Grim explained. "And besides, it not be our place to interfere in de affairs of de living."

"GRIM IS QUITE CORRECT," his associate agreed immediately. "WE ARE GENERALLY ENCOURAGED AGAINST INTERFER—"

Raven snarled and seized Grim's scythe from his slackened grip. "Fine, I'll do it myself!" Putting Grim's earlier instruction to use, the witch slashed a small portal into existence and stomped out of the underworld.

"Heh, how 'bout dat?" Grim rhetorically asked as he rubbed the back of his skull. "Are we sure dat de girl's adopted?" He shook his head. "Da boss isn't gonna be happy 'bout dis, is he, Bill?"

The reaper turned around to find that the addressed incarnation of Death had vanished, and that his remaining fellows were giving him a lot of personal space.

"Eh, Bill?"

With a sudden rush of air, Galatea reappeared in the Black Ink laboratory.

"It's done," the Argosian clone announced.

"You've upgraded the fleet's inter-dimensional projectors already?" Henggirl demanded. "I didn't realize that you could control time as well."

"Oh, I can't," Galatea admitted. "I'm just really fast. And, yes, I made the upgrades that you wanted—but I still don't see what good a bunch of antique ships are gonna do against a space navy the size of Darkseid's."

"Trust me," Doctor answered, "if they were good enough to fend off a full-scale Romulan assault, then they're good enough for an undead dictator. Now, all we need's a crew."

"We 'ave already taken care of ze personnel," an accented French voice announced as Fleur Delacour—who was dressed in taut leather armor and carried a bow and stocked quiver upon her back—led a similarly-attired contingent of Veela into the laboratory/war room.

"Excuse me?" Henggirl demanded confusedly as she took in the exceptionally un-Veela-like demeanor of the new arrivals. "What's with the Joan of Arc motif?"

"Mister Black did not tell you?" the French witch inquired with a smile. "I was ze... team captain... of ze Beaubatons Archery Club. Mister Black is the one who suggested that I teach ze ozzers." Fleur dismissed the matter with a wave of one dainty hand. "Now, ze crew 'as already been gathered and is waiting in ze courtyard."

"Who'd you get on such short notice?" the Medi Witch inquired.

"Well, ze Veela... ze Kitsune... ze Yuki Onna... zhose Aurors that are always 'anging around... zom dragons that Mr. Black flew with last zummer... several of zhose vampires and werewolves... my William iz gathering a few goblin troops..."

"And you're going to squeeze all of that onto our ships?" Doctor demanded incredulously.

"Don't be ridiculous," the French witch retorted. "Zom of zem will ride on ze Knight Bus. Monsieur Stan was most... 'ow do you say... accommodating?"

"I'm sure he was," Henchgirl agreed dryly.

Galatea blinked. "And you were able to get all of those... people... to agree to hop into another dimension's war... just like that?"

"We are Veela, and he iz Mr. Black," Fleur supplied with a shrug. "Between ze two reasons, ze ozzers could not refuse. So, shall we go?"

"After a lifetime of searching, I finally find a girl that likes me for myself!" Harry groused.

KA-RACK!

"Not to mention that she's adventurous and loves to experiment!"

WHACK!

"You pathetic, bastardly excuse for an Inferi!"

POUND!

"You didn't even have enough sense to stay dead!"

CRUNCH!

"And you had to go and kidnap her as part of some half-arsed attempt at a planetary invasion!"

SQUELCH!

"Not on my watch, you pretentious maggot!"

SPLEEN!

Destiny leaned back in his chair and permitted himself a brief smile. Not only were events back on course, but he also achieved a measure of satisfaction from the ever-disruptive Mr. Black. Now with both mortals and lesser gods convinced of his newfound status, the freedom-sponsoring rebel would never have the normal life he craved.

The fact that the recent influx of chaos would be twisted back into the original design was a nice bonus, as well.

The eldest of the Endless would have chortled, had such a display not been so unseemly.

"And what has you so happy?" a cheerful female voice called from behind him.

Destiny spun around to find the expected gothic form of his eldest sister, who was intently inspecting the nearby flora in his garden. "Whatever do you mean, Death?"

"It's nice to see you, too, Brother Dear," the spunky woman replied. "I just received some rather... unexpected... news, and thought that you might shed some light on the subject."

"Oh?" the blind man replied curiously. "And what subject might that be?"

Staring intently at the robed figure, Death asked, "Why, exactly, does it seem like half of Creation is suddenly convinced that Mr. Black... that Harry... is—"

"The missing half of the Source?" Destiny offered.

"So you do know what's going on, then?"

In reply, the man patted his ever-present book meaningfully. The significance of the Cosmic Log—which contained the entire sum of existence—was not lost on his sibling, who rolled her eyes.

"That wasn't what I meant and you know it!" she huffed irritably. "What flight of lunacy convinced you to do it? And don't bother denying it—this whole mess has your non-existent fingerprints all over it."

Destiny stiffened slightly. "Whatever are you implying, Sister?"

Death squeezed the bridge of her nose in frustration. "Are you going to tell me, or do I have to beat it out of you?"

"Your... colleague... is quite a disruptive influence," Destiny noted calmly. "Measures had to be taken to ensure that control was maintained. Rest assured that my only contribution was to insure that a certain manuscript was discovered at the optimal time, nothing more. Once Mr. Black learns of this new development, he should finally realize how inappropriate his influence truly is, and moderate himself accordingly."

"Uh, huh," his sister commented in an extremely unconvinced manner, "and what are you going to do if this sudden swell of belief manifests itself? He's talented enough at killing supposedly immortal opponents already. Don't you think it might be a bad time to be in your shoes at that point?"

"Do not concern yourself in this matter, Death," the elder sibling instructed. "Mr. Black has no more abilities now than he did before—it is only a few specific beings whose perception has been harmlessly affected."

"But what if you're wrong?" the pale-skinned female pressed. "I mean, he does out-flank you on a regular basis. Would you just check on it, Destiny? Please?"

The male personification sighed. "Very well," he agreed, before leisurely paging through his volume. "As I said, Death, there is nothing to—wait a moment! That passage wasn't there before!" Destiny began rapidly flipping through the relative future chapters. "This cannot be! It's—"

"Impossible?" Death offered. "Yeah, the kid's really good at that." She looked contemplative. "Of course, he's also really good at beating the stuffing out of people who prevent him from living a 'normal life'—whatever that means." She hummed thoughtfully. "I wonder how he'd do against an anthropomorphic personification that cramped that whole 'normal human life' thing he had going."

Her eldest sibling let the large tome slide from suddenly nerveless fingers. "Still, I know of this Mr. Black's nature," he said, as if attempting to reassure himself. "He is not given to extended periods of contemplation. He will never find his way to this, the Garden of Forking Ways. After all, I recall that he has a deep-seated distaste for mazes."

"That he does," the gothic woman nodded in agreement, "but forever is a very long time, and not even you can see to the end of it. It'd be a real shame if your sigil and contact info just so happened to make their way to him. Accidents happen, after all."

Destiny stared at his visitor helplessly, as visions of scythe-wielding, book-burning savages plagued his mind.

Clark looked at Bruce and Diana over the still-broadcasting Motherbox. "You know, as much as part of me wants to complain because of what I suspect he's referring to, I find that I'm actually enjoying watching Darkseid get pummeled. Shouldn't that disturb me?"

"Personally, I find his technique inventive," the Dark Knight replied, attention never wavering from the live video feed.

Diana brushed an errant lock of hair behind her ear. "Well, I'm intrigued at the noises his blows are making," the shapely Amazon admitted. "I was under the impression that 'spleen' was a bodily organ, not a sound effect."

"It must have been named after what it sounds like when you're hit by one," the Man of Steel conjectured, wincing as Mr. Black executed another savage—though entirely warranted, in his opinion—attack.

Batman tilted his head to the right thoughtfully. "I would have said that was physically impossible, but I'm looking at the proof right now," he finally admitted. "You know, we should probably go help the others take out the warships."

"In a minute," Clark waved distractedly. "It's just getting good."

"Owww," Kara groaned as she gingerly regained her footing. "That really smarts!"

Making sure that the Metrotower's security system was recording the transmission, her cousin rushed to her side and inspected a raised bump on the back of her head.

"Hey, so does that!" the Argosian complained. "Watch it, you—!"

SPLEEN!

The Girl of Steel blinked owlishly as her attention drifted to the ensuing fight. "Since when is 'Spleen' a sound effect?"

"Since when do Apokoliptians have two of them?" Diana appended incredulously.

Kara quickly took in the gory, televised scene. "Right then, if you'll excuse me?" The blonde woman's uniform faded to a monochromatic version of itself—the coloring not unlike that of her god-slaying paramour. Seizing the still-broadcasting Motherbox and recalling her last foray to the foul planet, she pressed the appropriate buttons from memory and created a Boom Tube back to Apokolips. "You kids behave yourselves, now. I'm gonna go keep Joe out of trouble."

Before any of the remaining Leaguers could respond, Supergirl flew through the intra-dimensional portal and Vanished.

Clark just shook his head resignedly. "All right, since it seems like Apokolips is no longer any of our concern, let's go reinforce the others. We've still got a job to do."

"What about them?" Batman demanded, gesturing at the bound super villains adhered to a wall.

"I think that Tartarus's watchdog should be up to the task," Diana professed, "which is probably why Mr. Black summoned it in the first place."

Cerberus barked authoritatively at them before re-focusing his attention on the Legion's remains.

"Whatever," Batman grunted. "Let's go."

A staccato of sharp barks roused the golden trio's attention just in time to witness a vertical slash appear in midair. Moments later, a familiar figure stepped through, allowing the tear to heal itself.

"And... we're through!" Henchgirl announced, engrossed in the hastily erected displays in the zeppelin's cabin. "All ships accounted for. Do we have a vector?"

Doctor's eyes involuntarily narrowed. "Mr. Black's Zippo locator just disappeared from the screen. I thought you said you fixed this thing!"

"I did fix it!" the Professor protested from the wheel. "Try hitting it on the side!"

"Now it says 'Signal lost!'" the Mediwitch replied.

The little man smiled nervously as every witch present suddenly glowered at him. "Just a tiny glitch—nothing to worry about," the inventor squeaked. "What was his last location again?"

The Doctor relayed the heading, promises of physical retaliation evident in every syllable.

Raven reappeared on Earth and took a moment to stare at the chaos that enveloped the Metro Tower. Not only was her father's new pet staring at a group of cowering super villains hungrily, but several of the human attendants were attempting to remove some sort of gory mess from the street.

"Dare I even ask?" the teenage witch finally voiced.

Diana smiled slightly. "Hello, Raven. What are you doing here?"

"When Father did not return to the Death Union meeting, I grew concerned. Then, this news program announced that Darkseid has been resurrected and somehow kidnapped Kara. Father then sent me a message with his Patronus, so I came here to assist him. Is he still here?"

"Mr. Black and Supergirl have already taken the fight to Apokolips," Batman informed bluntly as he hurriedly keyed data into his wrist computer, "which is what we should be doing, rather than standing around wasting more time. To make matters worse, it seems that the Watchtower's teleportation pads are malfunctioning as well."

Raven nodded. "I should be able to help with that." A quick swing of the scythe later and an inner wall of the Metro Tower suddenly had a portal to its orbiting cousin. "There you go."

The three adults looked at each other, before the two males both focused on Diana. Rolling her eyes at the pair, the Amazon gestured towards the ominous weapon.

"Just out of curiosity... since when do you carry a scythe?"

Raven shrugged. "Father's assistant was hesitant to help, so I... commandeered it."

An electrified mace being thrust through Raven's portal, soon followed by the redheaded Thanagarian herself, interrupted their conversation. Shayera took one glance at Raven and nodded to herself.

"Figured as much. Hang on a sec." The woman disappeared back through the portal momentarily, before returning with several costumed individuals.

"Nice job, Kid," Green Arrow praised, once he realized the source behind the alternate means of transportation. "I don't suppose you've got anything that'll carry us around the world, do you?"

In answer, one of the technicians exclaimed that a new wave of ships had appeared out of nowhere, and were headed directly towards them.

"Get us a visual," Batman ordered.

The resulting satellite footage, however, brought only more questions.

"Uh..." the archer began, "Am I the only one seeing several pre-World War One sea craft escorting a Zeppelin? What the heck is going on here?"

Raven's smiled. "According to Father's message, that should be my aunts, uncle, and several of Father's associates."

Within moments, the impossible vehicles stopped overhead and two blonde women flew out of the Zeppelin to meet them.

"Hey, gang!" Galatea greeted. "I'd like to introduce you to Joe's sister, HENCHGIRL. HENCHGIRL, the bunch of clods staring at the fleet is part of the Justice League. So... what'd I miss?"

"Father and Kara have gone to Apokolips to kill the resurrected Darkseid. The League is going to fight the parademons at this end, but they need some help getting there."

"Not a problem, Sweet Heart," the other woman announced, pulling out a Zippo as she did so. "Pencil? I need you down here."

Moments later, a robed redhead appeared between the two groups. "What's the matter, HENCHGIRL?"

"You like organizing messes," the elder witch announced. "We need you to take a look at those electronic maps and use our ships to get these people where they need to be. I'm going to be catching up with my niece."

Raven raised her hand tentatively. "Actually, I need to go let my friends in Jump City know what's happening."

"Alrighty then," HENCHGIRL agreed cheerfully. Placing two fingers over her mouth, she whistled sharply. "Oi, Roly Poly! We've gotta make a small detour!"

A solid black Pooka appeared in front of the women, and HENCHGIRL immediately jumped on its back and held out a hand to the girl.

Raven looked at the new arrivals confusedly, before carefully climbing onto the animal and holding the scythe over her shoulder. "Roly Poly?" the purple-haired witch finally asked.

"Well, Mr. Black wanted to call her 'Widow Maker'—on account of him being about the only male that she doesn't try to grind into the ground—but she eats so much that 'Roly Poly' just stuck. So, where's this Jump City, then?"

Amanda Waller took a deep breath to steady her nerves as the red telephone on her desk began ringing insistently.

"Hello, Mr. President," the Director of Metahuman Affairs greeted.

"Yes, Sir. We are aware of the situation."

"No, Mr. President. To the best of our knowledge, neither the Justice League nor our other allies possess a space navy built out of 1920s-era battleships."

"No, the Zeppelin isn't ours, either."

"Our initial findings indicate that Mr. Black is responsible, Sir."

"Yes, the same Mr. Black that Dr. Hamilton... encountered... a few weeks ago."

"Quite honestly, Mr. President, we don't know what kind of forces he can command. Presumably, far more so than this Darkseid character."

"We are not prepared to speculate why Mr. Black is defending the Earth at this time."

"Well, with all due respect, Mr. President, the Joint Chiefs don't know what they're talking about."

"Well, Sir, according to his psychological profile, Mr. Black would in all likelihood finish destroying Darkseid before coming back here, ripping North America right off the face of the planet, and then breaking it in half across his knee—and that's if he was in a good mood."

"Unfortunately, Sir, I don't believe that to be an exaggeration in the slightest."

"I will deliver your message personally, Mr. President."

"Good luck to you as well, Sir."

"Okay, Molly," Tim Hunter sighed at his best friend. "Explain to me again why I'm the one that has to keep paying for your ice cream addiction."

The brunette messily swallowed the upper portion of her vanilla ice cream cone. "That's easy, Doofus. Out of the two of us, you're the one that got adopted by an uber-rich super god. Speaking of whom, where is Mr. Black?"

"Oh, he took Raven off to some Death convention or something. He said he'd return later this evening."

The young girl breathed a sigh of relief.

"What was that for?" Tim demanded. "And why do you always tense up when he's around? Did he say or do something to you?"

Molly shook her head negatively. "No, nothing like that," she rejected, "and he is rather sweet... in a morbid, homicidal psycho kinda way. It's just that... he seems to attract trouble, doesn't he?"

The young wizard smiled slightly. "It's not like he goes looking for it—it finds him most of the time."

"But aren't you scared about getting caught in the crossfire? I mean, why do you have to get involved?"

Tim shrugged. "What else would I do? Get up, catch the bus, go to school, come back home, blow off my homework and go to bed—is that it?"

Molly huffed. "That's what kids do!"

He was silent for a moment. "I can't," he admitted quietly. "Not anymore."

"And why is that, Mr. Timothy Hunter?" his friend demanded hotly. "You better than the rest of us or somethin'?"

"I didn't mean it like that, Molly!" Tim protested. "It's just... he's taught me a lot—and I'm not talkin' about the spells, or the crazy adventures through time and space, or confronting weird magical creatures and all that stuff. As wicked as it is, none of that stuff really matters. One of the most important things that Mr. Black has taught me is that... well, there comes a time when you find yourself in a mess... and you can either do the easy thing, or you can do the right thing. And the right thing means that you have the guts make a stand and try to fix things when everybody else just turns a blind eye or runs away."

The sudden arrival of a glowing silvery stag interrupted the teenager's impromptu speech.

"W-what's that thing?" Molly demanded shrilly.

The young wizard smiled slightly. "That's Prongs, Joe's... Well, I guess you'd call him a guardian spirit of sorts." Turning to face the spell directly, Tim asked, "What's up?"

The silvery creature opened its mouth and relayed Harry's pre-recorded warning before vanishing.

"'Stay safe' huh?" Tim parroted amusedly as his street clothes transfigured themselves into the uniform that Robin designed back in Jump City. "As if."

"You're just a kid!" Molly protested. "What do you know about fighting these parademon thingies."

Tim looked at the girl calmly. "I know that, out of all the kids in this world, and the other worlds, in all the other dimensions, realities, and universes—Mr. Black chose to adopt me. Even knowing how bad I could turn out, how much pain and suffering I could cause others, he saved my life. No, more than that, he gave me a life worth living."

The young wizard pulled a sheathed Caledfwich from his pocket and showed it to the girl, who gasped at the obviously potent weapon.

"He also gave me this, and trusted me to use it correctly," Tim added. "And now, it's time that I started giving something back."

The young man's vow was accented by a series of loud explosions emanating from the center of London, and he looked at his friend tentatively.

"Tim, this isn't a game!" the girl pleaded. "You could be hurt—or worse! This is crazy!"

"You know something? Before right this minute, I never really understood why he did it. Why Mr. Black came to our dimension, why he saved Raven and me, why he constantly fights on behalf of people who either hate him or don't even know that he exists—none of it ever really made sense." The young wizard resolutely turned to the exit. "I get it now. I can't not help, not when I know that I can make a difference."

Huffing again, Molly replied, "Fine, then. Run off and be a hero—but you'd better be careful, Hunter!"

"You'd best stay here," the wizard noted, smiling slightly. "I'll be back in a bit," he added an instant later in a red and black blur.

Molly frowned at where her friend had recently stood, before elevating her glare to the heavens. "And you'd best be watching out for him if you know what's good for you, Mr. Black!" the girl shouted. "Or you'll be answering to me!"

Kara carefully headed to Ground Zero and tapped her boyfriend on the shoulder. "Ah, Joe?"

The hailed wizard turned and glared at the interruption, before forcing himself to assume a more neutral expression. "I'm a little busy, Kara. Can it wait?"

"Yeah... about that... would you mind just... taking a break for minute?"

Harry blinked. "This tosser kidnapped you," he began. "He attacked the Earth. He taunted me—and you're protecting him?"

Kara hastily shook her head negatively. "No no no! I just want to get a few good hits in myself!"

"Ah," the wizard eloquently replied. "Well, in that case. Be my guest."

"Thanks," she accepted cheerfully, before hoisting Darkseid aloft by his shirt. "Now, we really need to talk about how to treat a lady," Kara admonished as she planted a fist in the tyrant's rib cage, sending Darkseid through his throne. "There are certain things that you just don't do."

Harry smiled at the blonde, before frowning in confusion. "What's with the new costume?" he called.

"Oh, this is something that I've been experimenting on in my free time," Kara replied as she took the largest fragment of the ornate chair and hit Darkseid over the head with it. "Blue-and-red is great and all, but if we're gonna be working at night, I need something that'll blend in better."

Kara planted one boot right between where Darkseid's eyes used to be. "Besides, I thought I'd look stylish while I'm beating the snot out of somebody—it works for you, after all."

Harry raised both of his thumbs. "Very nice!" he commented.

The Argosian smiled brightly, before reaching behind her back and withdrawing a Grecian broadsword.

"Where the bloody hell did that come from?" the wizard demanded.

"Oh, Hephaestus gave it to me while you were taking your nap," Kara admitted as she sank the blade into Darkseid's remaining kidney.

Scratching his head, the wizard pointedly stared at her black mini skirt and equally-taut midriff-bearing shirt. "And where, exactly, were you hiding it?"

The blonde smiled impishly while leaning on the blade, which widened the gash in the Apokoliptian's latest ruptured organ. "If you're good, I might just show you later."

He smiled as Darkseid's hand began creeping towards the Motherbox on his belt—and Kara's dainty boot ground the

appendage into the floor. "And what if I've been bad?" Harry teasingly pressed as he Summoned the other Motherbox into his possession.

Kara worked her heel a few times, earning some renewed groaning from Darkseid. "In that case, after we take care of the garbage here, I'll definitely show you." To punctuate her promise, the young woman angled her sword and drove it into Darkseid's groin, elicited a rather impotent squeal.

Amazed at the young woman's tactics, Harry absentmindedly sat on an out-of-the-way chair.

"I think I'm in love," he finally admitted to himself in a mesmerized tone.

"There's Titan's Tower over there," Raven pointed out as the odd trio flew into the Jump City limits.

"Neat clubhouse you kids have," HENCHGIRL praised. "What rune cluster do you use to support the Tee's arms?"

Raven blinked. "Actually... I'm not exactly sure how Robin pulled it off. You'd have to ask him."

"I'll do that," HENCHGIRL promised. "The Architect is building a new Research and Development department, and I think having him build it inside a giant 'H' would be neat!" The genius paused in thought, before adding, "Best not let the Professor see this. He might get the notion to build a giant 'P' or something silly like that."

"Right..." Raven drawled, before several flashes of light and a series of explosions rocked the far side of the municipality. "I think my friends are over there," she pointed.

"Oke dokee," the elder witch agreed and directed the Pooka towards the disturbance. "Is this them?" she asked after a few moments' travel.

"The teenagers, yes," the purple-haired witch admitted before using Grim's scythe to blast several of the advancing Parademons. "Father won the jackal army from Anubis, and ordered them to help defeat the parademons."

"Did he now?" HENCHgirl quietly asked, looking at the girl over her shoulder.

Raven wordlessly nodded in agreement and fired another hex at a group of parademons closest to her friends. While the girl's attack connected, it also succeeded in drawing unwanted attention to the two witches.

"Well, your friends certainly are ambitious," HENCHgirl noted calmly as she dug through her handbag. "The only person that I've ever seen fight under worse odds is Mr. Black himself."

"Uhh... shouldn't we be running away or something right now?" Raven asked.

The Potions mistress grumbled. "C'mon! I know I put it in here somewhere!"

"What are you looking for?" the teenager asked as she began hexing the closest oncoming Apokoliptic soldiers.

"My can of mace. I always make sure to keep one with me."

Raven spared her new-found relative a disbelieving stare. "I don't believe that it's going to help us all that much!"

"Ah, here it is!" HENCHgirl exclaimed, withdrawing a small, black tube. Pointing the cylinder in the direction of the parademons, the witch thumbed off the lid and released the container's contents.

"Of course, I could be wrong," Raven admitted calmly as dozens of full-size spiked maces flew out of the canister and set upon their foes with an almost inspired level of savagery.

Fumbling around in her bag again, HENCHgirl passed a duplicate of the device to her passenger. "Here you go, Sweetie. Make sure you keep it with you at all times. After all, a girl can't be too careful these days."

Shocked, Raven just dumbly nodded in agreement.

Tim used the remains of a double-decker bus to bat another cluster of parademons into the ground before picking up his father's sword again and sighing in exhaustion.

"How many of these jerks are there?" the teenaged wizard demanded plaintively, before another set of growls drew his attention to a newly arrived group of the menaces. Side-stepping the fleeing civilians, the young hero-in-training took a deep breath and withdrew his wand into his free hand. Just as he prepared to square off against the new threat, a gust of wind blew past and sent him careening off his feet.

Tim slowly regained his feet. "What the bloo... dy..." He paused upon the unexpected sight of a purple bus mowing down the gathered parademons before noisily skidding to a stop. "Hell?" he finished incredulously.

Scratching his head in disbelief, the young magician walked over to the conveyance's entrance. "Hey!" he called. "Are you lot all right?"

If asked, Tim would have been unable to describe exactly what he expected in terms of a response. However, he was reasonably certain that a stampede of wand-carrying people in dresses wouldn't have been included. However, that is exactly what he received, and the youth hurriedly moved to the side as the onslaught of grim-faced personnel continued unabated.

"Why do I have the strangest idea that Mr. Black is somehow responsible for this?" the youth asked aloud.

"Black?" a suspicious voice demanded as a one-eyed, peg-legged pirate demanded as he stomped down the steps. "What do you know of Mr. Black, Lad?"

"Uh..." Tim hesitated as the odd colored prosthetic eye suddenly spun to glare at him, "he's my dad, see, and I thought—"

"Mr. Black doesn't have any kids," the man interrupted. "You're a spy for the enemy, aren't you?" he demanded. "Some sort of disguised agent planted by these daemon knock-offs?"

"Ease up, Mad Eye," a deep voice called out as a tall African man climbed out of the strange bus. "He's just a kid." Turning to the

adolescent in question, he smiled slightly. "Hey, there. My name's Kingsley, and that charming man over there is Auror Moody. You did your old man proud, Son. Now, go on and get inside—the Aurors will take care of things from here."

Tim looked from the tall speaker to his misshapen cohort, before finally looking around as the group of apparent wizards was laying into Darkseid's remaining troops with a vengeance. "Err... sorry, but who are you people? What are Aurors?"

The two elder wizards looked at each other. "They don't have Aurors here either?" Kingsley muttered. Shaking his head, the man turned back to Tim. "We're dark wizard catchers," he explained as he sent a series of Reductor curses against a pocket of resistance. "And occasional pest control. Now, please get on the bus where it's safe."

"I can't," Tim disagreed. "My friend is still out here, and you blokes need everybody you can throw at—Watch out!" Racing forward, Tim uprooted a post box and threw it into their opposition's desperate charge.

An attractive witch—who had nearly been overrun—turned her head and gaped at the youth. "He really is Mr. Black's kid!" she explained disbelievingly.

The teenager smiled at the older woman. "The name's Superboy, by the way."

"Right then!" Moody exclaimed. "Shacklebolt, Jones! You're with me! Let's show these shoddy excuses for trolls what Aurors can really do!" Blue eye spinning crazily, the man turned back to Tim.

"All right, Lad, lead the way to your friend."

'I'm never gonna hear the end of this!' Dawn mentally whined, as an irritating male voice berated her in the background. 'It was a simple chore—go fetch Mr. Black's Nundu from Catwoman and bring it back to the Leaky Cauldron. It's not like it's my fault that those stupid demons went and attacked the city!'

A throat was cleared insistently. "I'm sorry," the sloppily-dressed detective commented sarcastically. "Am I boring you? Interrupting your next little bout of destroying municipal property, perhaps?"

"Hey! I didn't mean to do that!" Key shouted at the Gotham police representative, the large Nundu growling her agreement. "It was an accident!"

"You leveled City Hall, Sweetness!" the overweight police officer spat. "That's one heckuva accident!"

"Look, Mr. Detecto-guy, maybe you didn't notice, but I was trying to stop that honkin' big spaceship before its cannon killed a whole lot of people. Cut me some slack!"

The large cop seemed ready to offer another retort before a gray-haired man laid a restraining hand on the other's shoulder. "Ease up, Bullock—she was just trying to help."

"But, Commish—!" Detective Harvey Bullock complained.

"That's an order," Commissioner Gordon stated firmly, before turning his attention to the strange female-feline team. "Look, Miss. You and your... cat... helped stop those demons, and I'm not complaining about that. Luckily, no lives were lost due to your actions either, but couldn't you have been a little more careful?"

Dawn looked around at the crumbled ruins of what once had been Gotham City's seat of government and sighed. Maybe the destruction did get a little out of hand, but it was Apocalypse Tuesday after all. "Okay, so maybe a few blocks got destroyed. It could have been a lot worse."

"A 'few blocks'?" the Detective exploded. "Try more like ten square miles!"

"Dude, that was awesome!" Beast Boy cheered as the last of the parademons were stabbed, smashed, sliced, and squashed into oblivion. "I mean, Robin was like 'Hii yah!', and those demon thingies were all 'Arr!', and then Cyborg went 'Booyah!' after those weird dog soldiers showed up—"

"B.B.!" the half-man, half-machine teenager interrupted. "Chill out, already!" When his green teammate seemed moderately settled, Cyborg turned his attention back to the new arrivals. "Hey, Raven! Who's your friend?"

"This is my... aunt," the gothic girl finally supplied.

"Henchgirl, nice to meet you," the Potions Mistress introduced herself.

Starfire charged forward and seized the witch in a tight hug. "Glorious! We get to meet another member of Friend Raven's family!"

At the elder witch's inquisitive look, Raven supplied, "Starfire's... a little high strung."

While the inventive female extricated herself from the Tamaranian's embrace, Robin was careful to keep one eye on the jackal foot soldiers while he redirected the conversation. "Raven, I thought that you and Mr. Black were off doing some mystical thing together."

Raven sighed. "We were, but Darkseid—the jerk who rules these guys—was somehow resurrected."

"And..." Cyborg prompted.

"He kidnapped Supergirl," the young Death's Assistant finished.

The teenagers' eyes collectively widened; the implications of that simple statement sufficient to send the shape shifter into a tortoise form.

Robin cleared his throat—several times. "And... err... where is Mr. Black... right now?"

"Killing Darkseid, of course," Henchgirl supplied in a resigned tone. "Probably the jerk's army after that. Hopefully, his temper will run out once they're all dead... but don't hold your breath. He's still obsessing over the last dark idiot that caused him this much trouble."

"The jackal soldiers are part of Anubis's army that Father... commandeered," Raven further explained.

"Well, we don't need those dog boys now!" Beast Boy asserted. "I mean, these parademon creeps are out for the count, and there aren't any reinforcements in—"

A boomtube opened directly over their heads, disgorging several new Apokoliptian warships.

Raven glared at her emerald teammate. "You... are such an idiot."

As the green shape shifter rubbed the back of his head nervously, a fiery gash suddenly erupted in the sky. Several blazing wraiths immediately emerged from the slash and set upon the so-called 'parademons' with an unparalleled degree of savagery.

"Hey!" Cyborg exclaimed as his electronic eye finally determined where he had last seen the unusual creatures. "Aren't those Trigon's old minions?"

"Indeed they were, once upon a time," Etrigan growled from the portal he had opened behind them. "They bow to no will save Mr. Black's own now, though."

Keeping her liberated scythe at hand, the young witch asked, "And what is your business here, Demon?"

The Demon Prince laughed. "You truly are your father's daughter," Etrigan declared. "In short, our business here is you."

"Explain." Raven demanded sharply.

"Mr. Black's recent additions to his family are known from the Silver City to the innermost portions of the Pit—as was his recent temper tantrum."

"So?" Raven pressed.

"So?" Etrigan demanded incredulously. "For the first time since the Fall, the angels and the demons have finally found common ground—making sure that Mr. Black doesn't blow a gasket if his offspring gets harmed somehow. Now, I don't personally think that your father would destroy the multiverse if you or that wizarding brat were to become fish food—but nobody wants to risk the possibility."

Etrigan shrugged. "Besides, even before the Church of Blood adopted your daddy dearest as its sole new object of worship, these guys have been begging me to intercede with your father on their behalf."

Raven frowned as she tried to make sense of what she'd been told. "You mean that bunch that Brother Blood runs?"

"The way I hear it, those weasels were only a foothold of the movement into this dimension—and they've already taken out their previous fruitcake of a leader. I guess someone told them about Mr. Black's views on child abusers like that H.I.V.E. academy mess. Anyway, the organization calls itself the Church of Black now, and I'm tripping over demonic emissaries from a few hundred of Trigon's old dimensions, each of the asking for marching orders."

"So then... why tell me? Shouldn't they take this up with Father themselves?"

The demon stared at her incredulously. "Why? Because they'd like to live for a little while longer, and people who annoy Mr. Black don't tend to live very long. For that matter, I'm not in a hurry to be hacked into little bits by your dad's scythe, either." Etrigan grimaced momentarily. "So... what does he want to do with the rest of the freeloaders?"

Raven shrugged. "Have them start on getting their own worlds in order, I guess. Obviously, they should stop following any of Trigon's orders that are hurting the innocent—which is probably most of them. I'll ask Father what else he wants to do when I see him."

Etrigan grunted and turned towards his waiting portal. "While we're on that topic, you might want to pay more attention over in Egypt. I'm told that there's a big mess out that way." His message delivered, the creature returned to its infernal realm.

Raven turned to the other witch at her side. "You seem to be taking all of this in stride," she noted.

Henchgirl shrugged. "After living with Mr. Black for a while, you get used to this sort of thing. I'm going to be teasing him something awful about this 'Church of Black' thing, though. So... since your

friends are safe now, want to check out Egypt before we go back to the others? You can tell me about this Trigon guy on the way."

The purple-haired witch stared at her elder disbelievingly. "Mr. Black didn't tell you about Trigon?"

"He mentioned the name briefly, but didn't really go into any specifics."

Raven took a deep breath and remounted the horse.

"Well, Trigon was another name for Scath, and he was a demon lord..."

"Okay, I'm done!" Kara said cheerfully as she all but bounced over to his perch. "You can put him out of our misery, now."

Harry smirked and picked up his scythe. "By your command," he drolly announced. Once his grisly chore was complete, he returned to the blonde's side.

"You know that's kind of disgusting, don't you, Joe?" Kara finally voiced as her boyfriend inspected his latest... trophy.

Harry chuckled as he balanced the remains of the Apokoliptian dictator—Darkseid's barren skull—atop one finger. Having been rather thorough with his incendiary hexes, the wizard possessed the sole remaining fragment of the dismembered corpse.

And since Luthor's machine had combined with Tala's magic to bind Darkseid's soul to his remains...

"Release me at once!" the craggy-faced shade demanded impotently.

"I think not, oh Mighty Darkseid," Harry disagreed mockingly. "You see, I've needed a new paperweight for my office for a while now, and I think that your otherwise empty skull will serve nicely." He suddenly grinned sharply as a transparent bubble appeared around the severed head, blocking out its reply. "Besides, I owe you a great deal of torment for this latest stunt of yours."

Kara faked a cough. "Not to be a nag, Joe, but there's still a bunch of parademons back on Earth. Shouldn't we go and do something about that?"

"Yes, Dear," he agreed. "Besides, dear old Darkseid and I have all eternity to catch up." Conjuring a box, Harry proceeded to crate up the skull and stow it in his coat pocket. "Right then. Shall we go?"

A dry voice replied from behind the wizard. "Actually, I would appreciate a moment of your time."

Harry spun around wildly and locked his scythe into a ready position. "Metatron? What are you doing here?"

The stoic chronicler raised an eyebrow upon hearing the ancient moniker. "You must be mistaken. My name is Metron."

Harry stared at the floating chair—or, more specifically, one particular symbol engraved upon its base. "Riiight," he agreed sarcastically. "Look, I'd love to stay and chat, but I'm a bit busy at the moment. So, unless The Voice wants to point us in the direction of the largest remnant of Darkseid's army, you're gonna have to come back later."

Metron, formerly known as Metatron, pinched the bridge of his nose tiredly. Of all the tasks for the Source to demand...

"Friend of yours?" Kara questioned.

"Meddlesome acquaintance of the Old God variety," he explained shortly. "We bump into each other every so often. I think the last time was a couple billion years ago."

"Actually, our most recent encounter would be the human festival called 'Woodstock', if memory serves."

Harry frowned. "I don't remember that."

The Old God's lips twitched briefly. "You wouldn't. Had I... participated... to the same extent as you did, I doubt that I could have even stood, much less... well, you get the idea."

Kara looked between the two males happily. "Now, this sounds interesting, Mr... Metron, was it?"

At her obvious prompt, Metron obligingly nodded and introduced himself. "Yes, my name is Metron, and I am a scientist, investigator, and chronicler—nothing more," the man in the floating chair stated importantly.

Harry rolled his eyes. "Of course, you're not. You just show up to 'observe' certain events—the unusual interference that tends to crop up in those events shortly thereafter has absolutely nothing to do with you whatsoever."

A hint of a grin—which was quickly hidden behind his hands—and a quirked eyebrow were the only indications of Metron's mirth. "What is a scientific experiment without the occasional systematically-altered test scenario?"

"I see," Harry replied, "so, your lurking behind the scenes while the odd note, potentially dangerous device, or other interesting phenomena is just part of some large-scale science project then?"

Kara nodded in sudden comprehension. "Oh, you mean like all those bad guys who cross you and then conveniently suffer those bizarre fatal accidents!" she exclaimed.

"Why... yes. How very astute of you," a now openly-grinning Metron announced proudly.

The wizard growled. "Is there any particular reason that you're here, Metron?" he demanded from between clenched teeth. "As I said, I'm rather busy right now."

"I can guide you to precisely where you need to be," the black-and-silver-clad man admitted, "but first I request that you to perform a simple task for me." He raised one hand to interrupt the wizard's immediate protest. "It will take only an instant, and then I shall transport you and your... companion... to where you wish to go."

Harry instinctively wished to reject another delay, but his onyx ring had already confirmed the other entity's assertions. And if hitching a ride on the Mobius chair would help clean up the mess back on Earth faster...

"Fine," the magician conceded. "What do you want?"

Hovering closer on his golden throne, Metron replied, "To arrange an introduction."

The trio was briefly surrounded by an opaque force field. When it cleared, Harry and Kara found themselves facing a gigantic stone wall decorated in strange carvings.

"Now what?" Harry demanded of his tour guide.

"You must pass through that barrier," the other man instructed. "Once you are inside, everything will be explained."

"You aren't coming with us?"

"What is to be discussed is for you and you alone. Your companion and I shall remain here, to fulfill my half of the bargain upon your return."

Kara immediately proceeded to express her negative opinion of their escort's proposal—at great length.

"Unless there are special circumstances, only a mortal possessing a twelfth-level intellect has the slightest chance of traversing the Source Wall and surviving," Metron informed the Argosian once she had calmed slightly.

At the blonde woman's subtle elbow to his midriff, Harry replied firmly, "Then she's overqualified on all three points. Though she frequently hides it, Kara is a genius, and she can hardly be considered a run-of-the-mill mortal. And I believe that this qualifies as a special circumstance, does it not?"

The Old God sighed. "Very well. If that is your decision, then you may both proceed. I, however, will remain here for your return."

The wizard nodded resignedly. "Right then, be seeing you," Harry grumbled before offering Kara his arm and walking resolutely towards the Source Wall.

"Bloody hell!" Tim swore as he swiped his borrowed enchanted weapon through another two charging parademons. "These things must breed like rabbits!"

Another riposte—coupled with a blow from a streetlamp-shaped cudgel—dispatched the last of the horde threatening the civilians hiding behind him.

"Alright, you lot, time to move!" he urged the others into motion. "Head that way and you'll run into a bunch of my friends wearing bathrobes. They'll escort you somewhere safe until this mess is over."

Waving off the discombobulated expressions of gratitude, Tim took the opportunity to regain his breath. After convincing Molly to stay inside of the odd purple bus—by way of a Stunning Hex when his childhood friend was looking the other way—Tim and the Aurors split up into pairs to better combat their enemy's widespread assault. Unfortunately, the young witch that had initially accompanied him took a grievous wound, forcing him to send her back with a band of fleeing refugees. Regretting his lack of reinforcements, Tim sank to the ground and propped himself against the blood-soaked—but still glowing—sword.

He had taken lives—many lives, if he were honest with himself. Unfortunately, they had left him with precious little choice in the matter, what with their blindly attacking any innocent human that crossed their path.

And so he killed them—by the score, sometimes.

Now, in the midst of the horrendous dead, the young Superboy wanted nothing more than to cry—but he restrained himself. Later, when the innocent were safe and people weren't looking at him like he was their only hope of survival... then, he would break down and grieve for what he lost that day. At the moment, he had to be strong on behalf of his people.

A sudden growl brought his fatigued head up to stare at yet more of the loathsome creatures from Apokolips, and he suddenly wondered exactly what those Aurors were doing while he killed their opponents for them. Warily climbing to his feet, Tim took in the situation.

It wasn't looking good.

Apparently, the creatures could eventually learn from their mistakes, and had foregone mindlessly chasing after the fleeing humans to completely surround him from all sides. Racking his brain for a solution, his memory suddenly recalled Raven describing what had happened on Themyscira last month, and what she ultimately had to do when faced with two wrathful gods and a horde of Inferi. Reaching a decision, Tim kept as many of his foes in sight as possible, and wrapped both hands around the sword's hilt.

"Father," the young wizard announced, using the paternal form of address for the first time, "If you can hear this, I could really use some help right about now...a bazooka or holy hand grenade would be nice..."

A golden shaft of light encircled the boy, before several winged forms seemed to descend from the radiance.

"Take heart, Young One," one of the new arrivals, looking suspiciously like an angel, instructed. "Your deliverance is at hand."

As the divine Rapid Response team economically disassembled the parademon horde with several copies of his own weapon, Tim stared up at the sky and blinked.

"That'll work, too. Thanks."

"You heard the man," Shayera confirmed Mr. Terrific's assessment on the drilling machines. "Rock and roll!"

Twin cracks caused the small group of Leaguers to jump involuntarily.

"Blimey!" a masculine British-accented voice announced. "So, this is the Big Apple!"

"No, that's what the Yanks call New York City," an identical voice replied. "This is Washington D.C., their capital."

The first man nodded before using a stick to disintegrate several of the nearby parademons. "Why'd you reckon they call it that, anyway? Does it look like an apple or something?"

"Not a clue, Gred," his counterpart admitted as he used a whip of flames to chase several of the Apokoliptian shock troops into his brother's hexes. "People here are just funny that way."

After reducing the rest of the fleeing troops to soggy bits, the inquisitive wizard asked, "Well, what do they call this place then, Forge?"

'Forge' shrugged. "I dunno. Let's ask that lot over there. Oi! Miss Wings! Does this city have a nick name?"

For her part, Shayera just stared at the two identical redheads that had appeared in their midst without warning. There was something oddly familiar about this scene. The two wand-waving men acted almost like...

"Uhh... I don't think so," she replied, before shaking her head as if to clear it. "Excuse me, but did Mr. Black send you?"

The two wizards looked at each other. "She's good!" Forge commented.

His brother nodded in agreement. "A literal cute bird, too," he noted idly before redirecting his attention to the Thanagarian woman. "As a matter of fact, the boss did sorta start the ball rolling. 'Go here. Deliver that. Blow this stuff up.' You know how it is. I'm Agent F, but you can call me Forge."

"My name's Agent G... and you can call me anytime!"

"So, Gorgeous," the Weasley twins sidled up on either side of the Thanagarian, ignoring the other Leaguers entirely. "What's your name?"

Shayera blinked at the unexpected barrage. "Shayera...?" she responded uncertainly before shaking her head again. "Listen, we don't have time to shoot the breeze! That thing over there is trying to turn this whole area into a volcanic wasteland!"

"It's always something," George noted aloud to his twin. "Acme?" he queried.

Fred nodded in agreement. "Acme."

Pointing their wands in the direction of the alien device, they both incanted, "ACME!"

"That should do nicely. Good job, Forge."

"Couldn't have done it without you, Gred."

Shayera stared at the two wizards incredulously. "But it's still there!"

"Wait for it," Fred instructed while checking his wristwatch. A faint whistling could be heard, becoming shriller with each passing second.

"You might want to put these on," George advised, as he offered the others bright purple earmuffs. He followed his own advice and smiled as a square shadow began extending out from the alien drill.

"Here it comes!" the other wizard warned loudly.

The League members stared slack-jawed as a cartoon-style anvil the size of a large building collided with their primary target. Once the cacophony of noise and debris had settled, the twins collected the purple protective devices.

"So..." George began as he wrapped one arm around Shayera's shoulders. "How about we make sure that all these invading prats have been properly destroyed, and then maybe you could show us what the cuisine is like in this dimension."

"Hey!" Fred protested as he pushed his brother out of the way, only to take his place. "I saw her first!"

Shayera simply raised an eyebrow at the situation. Her social life since the Thanagarian invasion had consisted mostly of evading Carter Hall's stalking and jockeying for position in her love triangle with John and Mari.

The woman shrugged in resignation. "You like Chinese?"

The two male redheads looked at each other. "I suppose so..."

"Good," Shayera announced, "Because you're buying."

"You'll have to get it to go," an authoritative voice announced from behind them.

"Waller," the redheaded woman greeted the other female shortly. "To what do we owe the... pleasure?"

"I need to speak with their boss on behalf of the President," the Secretary of Metahuman Affairs announced briefly, pointing at the two wizards.

The two redheads looked at each other, then at the new arrival.

"Your name isn't Delores by any chance, is it?" Gred inquired.

"How do you feel about the color Pink?" his twin immediately followed.

The short woman blinked. "No, and I hate it," she finally replied.

The twin wizards nodded. "Good enough for me," one of them announced.

"Agreed," the other Weasley uttered, before pressing a knob on his wristwatch. An ominous black automobile suddenly appeared out of nowhere and skidded to a stop in front of them. "Everybody in."

"Shot gun!" his brother shouted.

"Hey, X! Why are we here again?" Faith demanded as the group Ported onto an arid wasteland.

"Because Mr. T and the Pencil detected a large group of parademons heading this way," Xander replied, checking the edge on his battle axe.

"And these parademon things are evil, right?" Remus Lupin questioned again, as his bikini-clad girlfriend and her two teammates Ported down next to the rest of the group with several crates.

"And, instead of some nice breezy Midwestern paradise, we decided to meet them out in the middle of nowhere... why?" the Bostonian demanded. "And what's that chick doing with that funky rifle?"

"Ignore Hermione," the man occasionally known as Mr. Blue advised. "She has something of an obsession for over-powered weaponry—like that new plasma cannon from the Acme girls."

The attending Metamorphmagus rolled her eyes and checked the settings on her Black Ink pistol. "That's an understatement," she grumbled before turning her attention to the bushy-haired witch. "You do realize that our regular pistols can deliver the same exact output for a variety of spells while still being easily portable, right?"

The bushy-haired bookworm pumped the slide, generating an ominous hum. "I like the soothing sounds I get out of this one."

"The glow of doom from the barrel is a nice touch, too," Luna agreed absentmindedly.

Harry had many expectations as he crossed the odd threshold. A complete void save for the pair and the one requesting the meeting was one such theory. Or, perhaps, he might stumble across some sort of ethereal scene with fog and strange lights. For that matter, an enchanted cave wasn't completely beyond the bounds of reason.

Whatever the case, the wizard would have never imagined finding himself standing in Ollivander's dust-covered shop. Just as it appeared during the summer before his first year of Hogwarts, the store appeared empty.

And, just as was the case then, Harry sincerely doubted that the two of them were alone.

"Nice illusion," he called out to the shelves filled with wands, "but I'm on a pretty tight schedule; my girlfriend and I've got several really bad people to kill. So, if it's all the same to you, can we just get on with it?"

A sigh was heard from behind the shelves, before shuffled footsteps heralded the arrival of the expected facsimile. "That's the trouble with young people these days," 'Ollivander' noted. "Everyone's always in such a hurry."

"Is there any particular reason why you helped yourself to my memories?" Harry asked, ignoring the criticism.

The wizened form of the shopkeeper made a show of scratching his chin. "Yes," he decided, "and no."

Harry rolled his eyes. "Let's try again. Why are you impersonating a wand merchant from another dimension?"

"I wished to speak with you in a familiar environment," 'Ollivander' replied. "This place seemed sufficient." Looking at Kara, the simulacrum answered her unspoken question.

"You may call me the Source, child."

"All right... Source," Harry grouched, "why exactly did you want to speak to me?"

"I wish you to perform a... service... for me," the imposter admitted. "You may not recall but, eons ago, I was attacked without provocation by the reigning gods of the time and was thus split in twain. My retaliation was swift, and I was fortunately able to defeat our foes. Even with my... our... imperfection, I attempted to recreate that which was lost. Unfortunately, while I successfully routed my enemies, I was too diminished to restore everything, resulting in a flawed Fourth World. Instead of the champions of peace and justice, my creations seem incapable of anything save mindless savagery against each other. In any event, while this part of me was eventually able to recover and defeat my enemies, my other half remained separate far beyond this barrier—until now."

Harry suddenly felt a sinking sensation in the pit of his stomach. "You don't say?"

"Yes, I do say. While I was able to Create this consciousness to evolve, I did not believe that my Destructive half would have the same opportunity. Nonetheless, it seems that my Anti-Life twin has finally managed to manifest itself in a physical form—you. That is why I brought you here in the first place. Now, at long last, we will be able to completely obliterate these so-called New Gods and begin again."

The wizard sighed miserably. "Listen, Source, I can understand you wanting to reunite with yourself—to an extent, anyway—but this is all just one big misunderstanding. I'm really just a run-of-the-mill mortal, you see, not some cosmic force of destruction."

"The shell you inhabit may have once been mortal," the Source allowed, "but its intended life force expired long ago—in its second year, if I am correct. At that moment, your seizure of the shell ended any semblance of mortality... even if you are suppressing most of your essence."

Harry growled in frustration. "I'll admit that I suffered a slight... accident... when I was fifteen months old, but I'm still human—more or less. But even if I weren't, I still wouldn't murder innocent people just because they don't behave like you want."

"THAT IS YOUR FUNCTION! " the illusion of the kindly old wand maker intoned deeply, his voice seemingly coming from every direction. "YOUR TIME LIVING AMONGST THE MORTALS MAY HAVE CLOUDED YOUR JUDGEMENT, BUT I SENSE THAT YOUR TRUE SELF REMAINS—HOWEVER REPRESSED. DESPITE YOUR DENIALS, YOU KNOW THE TRUTH! YOU ARE THE SHADOW THAT CORRUPTS AND DESTROYS EVERYTHING IT TOUCHES! YOU ARE THE BEAST OF JUDGEMENT, THE DARK AT THE END OF EVERYTHING! YOU ARE THE END OF GODS AND WORLDS AND UNIVERSES. THAT IS YOUR PURPOSE!"

Harry glared at 'Ollivander', wanting desperately to protest the accusations but secretly fearing that the entity before him might somehow be right. There couldn't possibly be a way for Voldemort's Killing Curse to do what was just suggested. This entire incident had to be just another case of mistaken identity... right?

The third individual present, which had remained silent until this point, seemed of a different mind.

"Listen up, you creepy old geezer! I don't know what your damage is, but you obviously don't know squat!" Kara intoned sharply. "Joe is probably one of the most self-sacrificing guys that I've ever met! He has powers that put entire pantheons of gods to shame, and he only uses them to protect the innocent. Every time I turn around, I find some other person—or civilization, or planet—that only exists

because Joe stepped up and saved them all when no one else would, or could. I haven't seen him corrupt squat, and he never destroys anyone or anything unless there's an innocent life at stake. So what if he can single-handedly trash a universe—that's only one very small part of who he is. And if all you're gonna do is call Joe an unfeeling murderer, then you can blow it out the other hole—'cause we're leaving!"

"YOU DARE TO ADDRESS ME SO!" the Source exclaimed hotly as the Diagon Alley shop faded into nothingness. Harry and Kara found themselves facing a figure formed entirely of white flames in an otherwise featureless void. "YOU SHALL PAY FOR YOUR IMPERTINENCE!" the entity vowed, and sent a fiery barrage directly at Kara.

While Harry may not have known how to reply to the Source's earlier comments, he certainly knew the proper procedure for dealing with someone attacking his family.

"YOU WILL NOT HARM HER!" the suddenly skeletal magician countered, freezing the blazing projectile in its tracks. Upon seeing the success of his Yuki Onna-inspired hex, Harry cast the same spell through his scythe at his conflagrated opponent.

The Source melted the frigid barrage with ease. "WHY DO YOU REFUSE TO PERFORM YOUR DUTY?" it demanded.

"Because they're innocent!" Harry protested, all the while plotting a diversion that would allow him to reach Kara and Apparate her to safety.

"THEY ARE FLAWED, IMPERFECT CREATIONS! NEW GENESIS AND APOKOLIPS REMAIN DIVIDED WHILE THEIR POPULATIONS EXPEND THEMSELVES ESCHEWING ORDER TO SOW CHAOS! SUCH FAILURES MUST BE ELIMINATED!"

"They're not supposed to be perfect!" the Potter scion protested heatedly. "That's the whole point! Mortal or immortal, human or divine—they're all just people! Yeah, a few of them have gone bad, but you'll get that out of any species. I've met several of these so-called gods, and they're pretty much just like anybody else. I mean, sure, Zeus is a dedicated skirt-chaser... Hades seems to have the political savvy of a five year old... and don't even get me started on

the Norse and Egyptian pantheons—but that's life for you. It doesn't mean that they're bad people, and it certainly doesn't give you the right to summarily execute them. From everything I've learned, New Genesis and Apokolips aren't any different; the Apokoliptians just got caught up in Darkseid's lust for power, and Highfather is doing the best he can to prevent the New Genosians from being swept along for the ride. Sure, they've made their share of mistakes... but how would they—or any of us—learn otherwise?"

Their sole current source of illumination remained silent and immobile.

"Look," he finally uttered, "let us finish cleaning up Darkseid's mess. Then, you and I can pay the Highfather a visit and I'll show you just what sort of failures the New Genosians really are."

In reply, the humanoid figure vanished, leaving Harry and Kara alone in the void once more. The darkness receded moments later as a glowing ball of light appeared in front of him.

"That is acceptable," the Source announced as it flew into Harry's hands—which the wizard did not recall ever extending in the first place. "I shall accompany you on your journey."

"Err..." Harry hesitated as the reality of the situation dawned on him, "I appreciate your offer, but I'll probably need my hands before we're through."

The luminescent sphere morphed into a pair of fitted gloves in reply.

The wizard just sighed. "Fine, then," he mumbled. "How do we get back to—?"

The emptiness gave way to reveal the exact same place where they first entered the Source Wall.

"—Metron?" Harry finished confusedly.

"I trust that your communion with the Source was memorable?" the white-haired man atop the throne chair inquired politely.

The other man glanced down at his gloved hands and nodded. "You could say that."

"Shall we proceed, then?"

Harry forced thoughts of his recent confrontation from his mind and wrapped one arm around Kara's shoulders, concentrating on the matter at hand.

A sharp nod later and the Promethean Galaxy was bereft of visitors once more.

With the presence of his new allies, Tim was able to catch his second wind long enough to eliminate the remaining threat. Once Darkseid's foot soldiers were destroyed, the Host returned to their home, leaving behind nothing more than several dozen corpses and a wish of goodwill towards the 'Dark Bringer'—apparently another title for his infamous progenitor.

The battle won, Tim used the magnificent sword as a cane to hold himself aloft as the remaining residents tentatively came out of hiding. Seeing nothing more than their teenage savior remaining, several of the braver individuals approached him while the more squeamish avoided staring at the grisly scene.

For his part, the wizard was just thankful that the fighting was finally over and done—magically sustained flight and super speed took a lot out of a guy. Although, he thought he might be able to rustle up enough energy for a Reductor Curse or two when flashbulbs began going off in his face. Clenching his jaw, the young man wrapped his hands around either side of the weapon's guard—unconsciously presenting the inscription to all the impromptu photographers present.

His first clue that something had gone awry was a shocked gasp from one of the women at the front of the crowd. Had her surprised exhalation not been sufficient to alert him, however, the masses suddenly kneeling before him while whispered exclamations of the 'Once and Future King' certainly would have seized his attention.

The woman who first knelt bowed her head. "What is your command, My Lord?"

She seemed perfectly willing to wait indefinitely for his reply—which was convenient, as the most coherent thought bouncing through his mind wasn't intended for polite company.

'Things can't possibly get worse than this,' Tim decided.

Moments later, the crowd involuntarily parted to reveal the almost-visibly-steaming form of his best friend—whom one of those ever-so-helpful Aurors must have revived.

'Then again,' he admitted with a wince, 'I could be wrong.'

"We've got to find a way to take this thing out for good!" John Stewart advised as his ring cut down the advancing parademons defending the alien drill.

Flash skidded to a stop in front of the other man and cheerfully offered a suggestion. "Why don't you just throw it into the sun?"

The Green Lantern of Sector 2814 just stared at the speedster, lost in thought.

"Yeah, I guess that was a pretty stupid idea," Flash admitted after a few moments.

"No, maybe you're onto something," John disagreed. "But I'll need more leverage... and a trench."

"On it!" Wally called out, already running towards the menacing machine. Within a few moments, the Fastest Man Alive had succeeded in wearing a ring into the ground around their objective and reappeared next to his friend. "Now what?"

In reply, John concentrated his will and formed an emerald catapult, forcing the scoop under the drilling machine via Flash's trench.

"Oh, cool!" the speedster breathed out in awe as the green construct launched the burrowing apparatus into the air. Unfortunately, its trajectory soon proved that it would land a good deal nearer than the sun.

"Doesn't look like it quite made escape velocity," Green Lantern noted idly.

Flash smiled as the drill struck the alien battle cruiser during its plummet back to Earth. "Nope! Good effort, though."

"Unfortunately, t'ey now know that we are 'ere!" the Crimson Fox announced hurriedly, pointing at the score of parademons advancing on their location.

"Not a problem, Beautiful!" Flash told her calmly. The Scarlet Speedster blurred for an instant before he reappeared, holding a rose towards the French perfume entrepreneur. "This is for you," he announced. "Now, if you'll excuse me."

The Fastest Man Alive accelerated towards the approaching group and, before the Apokoliptians could even realize what danger they were in, soundly defeated them. Making a superfast supply run to a hardware store several blocks away, the swift metahuman bound the threatening mob together with commandeered steel cable.

"See?" Flash prompted an instant later, standing once more next to the attractive Crimson Fox and the resigned Green Lantern. "No trouble at all!"

"Oh, yeah, Hot Shot?" the former U.S. Marine demanded, while pointing behind the self-congratulating Speedster.

Following John's digit, Wally slowly spun on his heels as the Justice League trio was swiftly surrounded by over a hundred of the Apokoliptian foot soldiers.

"We're in trouble!" the red-clad man exclaimed.

The trio—and their soon-to-be executioners—halted as a shadow suddenly encompassed the lot of them. Looking up, John could just barely recognize the underneath of a World War II-era battleship hull.

"Ah, man!" Flash whined. "What now?"

The Green Lantern took advantage of the distraction to fly the three of them out of harm's immediate way. "That doesn't look like one of Darkseid's ships."

Several cannons appeared out of formerly hidden portcullises in the ship's sides and oriented on a range of ground and air targets. An instant later, those same targets came under heavy fire.

"Well, at least they're on our side," Flash pointed out from inside the emerald bubble. "Shouldn't we help them out?"

From their vantage point, the three watched as dozens of silvery-blond-haired women armed with bows appeared on deck.

"What in the world?" the masked D'Aramis sister breathed incredulously, as the female archers proceeded to lay waste to the ground troops. Meanwhile, the impossibly-hovering vessel used its projectile weaponry to great effect against the remaining Apokolips air support.

"I sense Mr. Black's hand in this," John finally announced as he guided them towards the craft.

Flash pointed to the mast of the ship, which was proudly flying the Skull and Bones upon its mast.

"You think?"

"Hey! We're back in Metropolis!" Kara exclaimed as the hover chair appeared over the lazily spinning globe atop the Daily Planet.

"You are correct," Metron agreed placidly. "Exactly one instant after you agreed to accompany me to the Source Wall—as we agreed."

Harry grunted an acknowledgement as the pair of League members took flight. "Well, thanks for the lift," he offered, already lining up a Reductor curse with the nearest group of parademons.

"It was my honor to serve the Source," the Chronicler replied.

The wizard snorted, before muttering, "If you say so."

"C'mon, Joe! There's still a bunch of bad guys to hurt, and I see Cl... Kal El... over that way!"

The scythe wielder sighed. "Yes, Dear. Right behind you, Dear."

"Bye, Megatron!" Kara called as the pair flew into battle.

The Old God stifled a pout. "It's Metr... oh, never mind!"

The white-haired figure idly watched the younger pair as they laid into their enemies with a vengeance. Then he smiled.

"I wonder what Mr. Black will say when he discovers my 'observing' this battle."

Completed covered in blood, Xander was happily fighting the good fight. At long last, he finally found what he had sought since his induction into the Black family—Action. Unfortunately, the so-called parademons proved a poor challenge for him and his axe. Fortune soon smiled, however, when a new enemy revealed himself, completely enshrouded in flame.

"You dare to defy the will of Darkseid?" the potential true Demon demanded.

The brown-haired melee looked at his axe thoughtfully, before giving the New God another considering glance. Suddenly grinning widely, he shoved the weapon back into its holster underneath his coat and replaced the weapon with an oversized Acme mace.

Satisfactorily equipped. Xander laughed. "Of course, I do, Apokoliptian puppet! I am The Master of Battle, and will protect this world... just as I have done for others."

The fiery individual seemed to frown as he motioned for the remaining parademons to cease fighting. "You are of New Genesis, then? I know nothing of you."

"No, Brimstone, I am not from New Genesis," the immortal brunette admitted. "But if it's an introduction you want... I've been called many names: joH'a' vo' by the Klingons. Protector of Mankind by the people of this world. The White Knight by demons, and a girl I know affectionately calls me the Zeppo. I may not start wars if I can help it, but I will definitely put an end to them when I can. I am Nighthawk or, if you prefer, Mr. Blue. It will be a pleasure to kill you."

Brimstone laughed. "You make much of yourself, little man! Very well, I shall introduce myself as well. I am fire and destruction, the

destroyer of the False Gods, the servant of an angry God, the true God Darkseid. I am Brimstone, the one who burns by touch."

Xander put his sword up in salute, the blood red stone in the pommel gleaming and the face on its guard displaying a visage of fury. "Now that the niceties are out of the way... shall we battle?"

"Let us do so, False God!"

"Thanks for the help," Clark called out as Harry sent an enthusiastic Reductor curse through the shielding of the last Apokoliptian war wagon.

The wizard smiled. "Trust me, the pleasure was all mine."

"And he really means that," Kara immediately supplemented.

Clark and Diana floated towards their timely reinforcements. "Well... in any event, thanks."

The magician smirked. "If you really feel that strongly about it, you can return the favor by giving me your honest opinion."

"On what?" the Man of Steel asked, confused.

The other male pulled out his most recent trophy. "I'm thinking of hanging this on a stone wall. You think I'd be better off with English Oak, or Redwood?"

"Release me immediately, and I will overlook this unseemly display!" the disembodied voice of the twice-murdered tyrant ordered harshly.

Beginning to muster the energy for a Patronus through his gauntlet, the wizard's grin turned positively wolfish as the voice suddenly began shrieking in agony. "You'll have to excuse Uxas," Harry idly remarked. "It seems that disembodiment doesn't really agree with him."

Ignoring her boyfriend's grisly game, Kara made a show of brushing off her hands. "Well, it looks like it's just us in the sky for as far as I can see."

Harry groaned. "We've been over this, Kara. There are some things that you just don't say out loud."

"Oh, be serious, Joe! It's not like a whole new fleet of warships is just gonna appear out of nowhere!"

A new fleet of warships appeared without warning, surrounding the quartet.

"Oops!" the Argosian murmured sheepishly as the three brunettes glared at her.

Within moments, the newly-arrived armada disgorged dozens of strangely costumed individuals. The ranks parted as the apparent leader flew towards the Leaguers in a strange contraption replete with gatlin gun.

"We came as soon as we got word of Darkseid's resurrection," the masked man announced bluntly. "According to Motherbox, Darkseid should be right here." He looked around, completely puzzled at the lack of evidence. "I don't understand."

Clark cleared his throat meaningfully and pointed at Harry's hand, which still loosely held Darkseid's possessed skull. "Your equipment was telling the truth, Orion."

"How can this be?" the New Genosian demanded.

Harry shrugged. "Well, this git here," he presented the skull for closer inspection, "came back from the dead without permission, which kinda irritated me. Then, he goes and kidnaps my girlfriend, which really got under my skin. So, being understandably upset, I... took steps."

"He slew Darkseid's minions, opened a portal to his throne room, and popped in to reduce the Zombie King to ash," Kara clarified.

"By yourself?" a red-haired man in a white unitard queried.

Kara noisily cleared her throat.

"Oh, yeah," the wizard allowed, "Kara helped a bit."

The blonde woman punched him in the shoulder.

"But the prophecy states that only I can kill Darkseid," Orion protested.

Harry nodded knowledgeably. "That's the funny thing about prophecies—just because one tells you a way of doing things doesn't mean that it's the only way. And besides..."

He grinned and began conjuring another Patronus, inciting another round of pained screams from his macabre trophy.

"Dear old Darkseid's not entirely dead yet."

An older man bearing a shepherd's hook joined them. "We might have been too late for this battle, but our scans of Apokolips shows that Darkseid's engine of destruction remains in motion."

"We're working on that as well," Harry replied. "In fact..." he returned the skull to his pocket and withdrew his Zippo. "Pencil, have you been monitoring things in this dimension?"

"By Lady Henchgirl's order, Mr. Black," the Administrative Assistant announced. "I am currently in the... Metro Tower, I believe it's called. How might I be of service?"

"I need a status report."

"Of course, Sir. Reports are still coming in, but Mr. Terrific and I have confirmed the destruction of ninety five percent of the enemy forces. The leftovers should be annihilated within the hour."

"Excellent, Pencil. Any news on friendly casualties?"

The redheaded wizard paused briefly. "None, Sir, as usual."

Harry smiled happily. "Thank you, Pencil. That will be all." He slipped the Zippo back in his pocket.

The old man sighed in relief. "Then this long war is finally over."

One of the other New Gods spoke. "What shall we do, Highfather?"

"Aid our allies in disposing of Darkseid's lingering presence on Earth, then return to New Genesis to enjoy the peace that is to come."

Harry fixed his palms with a questioning glare. "Hardly the pack of mindless savages that you promised," he murmured wryly.

'The aged one is an anomaly, nothing more,' the Source mentally insisted.

The wizard growled. 'You know, for a supposedly supremely intelligent being, you're being remarkably stupid! Haven't you been paying attention at all?'

His gloves glowed white before a humanoid figure appeared in front of him. "I will put an end to this debate once and for all!" White tendrils of energy shot out of the Source's physical manifestation, connecting with the minds of every New God accompanying Highfather.

"By the Source!" the white-haired leader of the New Genosian exclaimed before falling to his knees atop his hovering platform.

Moments passed in silence before the ghostly extensions withdrew into the solemn Source.

"This data makes no sense," it finally admitted.

"Sure it does," Harry explained as the New Genosians recovered from the unannounced mind probe. "Darkseid and his lust for power warped the people on Apokolips into mindless peasants. On the other hand, Highfather over there led this lot in a far more... human... direction. I expect the people left on Apokolips can be brought around, now that Darkseid's influence has been removed."

The embodiment of the Source remained silent for several moments. "This scenario is most unexpected."

Harry snorted in amusement before retrieving his hat from its pocket in his coat. "Well, that's life. What can I tell you?"

"But... they are disjointed... incomplete. Their very worlds have been wrongfully split asunder."

Harry pinched the bridge of his nose. "Then just shut it already, and go fix it!"

The avatar stared at the wizard in confusion. "But you have already refused to destroy them so that they might be recreated."

Tiredly wiping one hand down his face in frustration, Harry caught a glimmer out of the corner of his eye and quickly assembled a plan.

"Alright, then. You see that golden globe over there?" the magician asked, gesturing at the ornament atop the Daily Planet some few blocks away. "For the sake of argument, let's agree that it's your original Fourth World."

He cast a powerful Cutting Hex at the metallic sphere, splitting it and sending the two halves plummeting to the ground.

"Watch closely," Harry advised, before casting a Reparo charm. The two halves immediately arrested their descent, before flying back atop the sky scraper and reforming into a single larger whole. "See? Bob's your uncle, Mary's your aunt; one planet, good as new."

"I understand," the Source finally acknowledged.

"Wonderful!" Harry breathed happily. "Off you go, then!"

"Yes, we shall... repair... the situation at once."

The wizard's pleasant mood ground to a sudden stop. "Oh, no!" the wizard immediately rejected. "No, no, no! There is no 'we'! There's just 'you' and 'I'—and 'I' am having no part of this! You just toddle off and take care of the rest of it. There's a good supernatural entity."

"But... I cannot," the Source confessed. "I am the force of Creation—Destruction and Re-creation lay within your sphere of influence, not mine."

Harry growled in frustration. "I'm not believing this!"

"Well, it isn't like you haven't done this sort of thing before," Kara admitted quietly—though not quietly enough to prevent the other Leaguers from overhearing her comment.

Harry glared at the girl briefly. "Whose side are you on, anyway?"

The Argosian smiled sheepishly. "Sorry, but you know he's not gonna drop it until you do something about it."

The wizard sighed resignedly. "Fine, I'll tag along—but only in an advisory capacity. Understood?"

"That is acceptable," the Source agreed before the pair vanished in a burst of white light.

"Hey!" Kara exclaimed upon being left behind once again. "What about me?"

A/N: Sorry for the extended delay. Hopefully, this 22,000 word chapter was worth the wait.

Most of the concluding scenes have already been written, and I just have to order them chronologically and write a few paragraphs to tie everything together. With luck, I'll have the final chapter ready for posting with minimal delay.

I worked a few omakes and cameo appearances into this chapter, most noticeably Aftermath by Chris Hill and the Darkseid Deathmatch by Kinsfire. Kudos to those who recognized that Hermione's new plasma cannon was inspired by one of my favorite web comics, Schlock's Mercenaries.

Many thanks to James and Chris for proofreading this chapter, and to all the CaerAzkaban group members whose suggestions appear in this update.

Thank you for your interest, and please remember to review.

Previous Chapter
Terminal Justice

Chapter 18: ...And Let Slip the Dogs of War
by Overkill

Next Chapter

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